

# MADINAT AL-ZAHRA: HISTORICAL REALITY AND PRESENT-DAY HERITAGE

*Antonio Vallejo Triano*

**M**adinat al-Zahra is undoubtedly one of the mythical cities in Islam, present in the collective imagination as a place associated with beauty, wealth, magnificence and ostentation and in political terms with the greatness of the Caliphate of Cordoba.

The city blended together all the ingredients in this idealization: its swift and sudden construction, a decision made by the Caliph and possibly motivated by love; wealth and the origins of its structural and decorative materials; the high number of workers that took part in its construction and the involvement of skilled labor from the diverse corners of the Islamic world; the quality of its infrastructures and architecture and the brilliance of its working life. All of these are the characteristics described, often in hyperbole or with great embellishment, in the sources we possess on the city, some of which were written when it was nothing more than a field of ruins.<sup>1</sup> This is also in addition to the ephemeral nature of its existence — little more than seventy years, from the year 936 to 1013 — and its destruction, associated with the fall of the Caliphate and viewed by its contemporaries with tremendous desperation and a feeling of loss, that remained faithfully reflected in historical sources and, most of all, in poetry.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the ferocious way its structures were plundered, which began after it was abandoned, played a part in this process of idealization; not only the disappearance of the remaining materials over a short period of time, but also the memory of the place where the city was built.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For these sources please refer to José Miguel Puerta Vilchez (2004). *Ensoñación y construcción del lugar en Madinat al-Zahra*, in *Fátima Roldán Castro (coord.) Paisaje y naturaleza en al-Andalus*. Fundación El Legado Andalusi: Granada, pp. 318-324.

<sup>2</sup> Emilio García Gómez (1947). «Algunas precisiones sobre la ruina de la Córdoba omeya», *Al-Andalus*, xii, pp. 267-293; Henri Pérès (1937). *La poésie andalouse en arabe classique au XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, pp. 124-126; Leopoldo Torres Balbás (1982). Arte califal, in *Ramón Menéndez Pidal (dir.) España musulmana hasta la caída del Califato de Córdoba (711-1031 de J. C.)*. *Historia de España*, vol. iv. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, pp. 427-429.

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Ocaña Jiménez (1986). Madinat al-Zahra, in *International Union of Academies. The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. v. Leiden: E.J. Brill, pp. 1008-1010.

This exaltation was not only constructed *a posteriori* after the destruction of the city, the metropolis also bred profound admiration among its contemporaries, as the historian al-Maqqari related in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when, upon referring to previous authors, he indicated that:

[...] there was nobody, absolutely nobody, that entered that Alcázar from the furthest lands, from the most diverse faiths, be it a king, an emissary or trader, that did not wholeheartedly conclude that they had never seen the like, and further still, they had never heard of anybody speak of something similar, nor had it ever even occurred to them.<sup>4</sup>

### CONCEPTION AND PLANNING

The building of Madinat al-Zahra following the self-proclamation of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir ('Abd al-Rahman III) as Caliph gave rise to one of the most brilliant periods in the history of al-Andalus. Its conception took place within the context of the construction of large capital cities by different Islamic States at the time, and, therefore, represented the height of urban expression in the Umayyad Caliphate, in direct competition with its rival, the Fatimid Caliphate; the name (Madinat al-Zahra, 'the Brilliant City') can be interpreted within the framework of this permanent political-religious rivalry. Moreover, on one side, a possible relationship with Venus (*Zuhara*) has been noted, as opposed to the allusion to Mars (*al-Qahir*) used by the Fatimids for their new capital in Egypt,<sup>5</sup> while on the other, it has been suggested that it has some relationship with Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, with the title *al-Zahra* ('the Shining One').<sup>6</sup> This author believes that this last name could contain religious references alluding to the consideration that it was probably the «staging» of paradise on earth, one of the most important characteristics being its «brightness». This same allusion to Madinat al-Zahra as a «symbolic representation» of paradise has been put forward through the analysis of the palatial epigraphy since the inscriptions on certain buildings reflect landscapes alluding to the Koran paradise, with its gardens and palaces causing this association to be established.<sup>7</sup>

The construction of an urban center with these characteristics represented truly monumental efforts in planning as it covered numerous aspects. For the provision of different

<sup>4</sup> Al-Maqqari (1988). *Nafh al-Tib*. Beirut: Ed. de I. 'Abbas, 8 vols., p. 566. Quoted in José Miguel Puerta Vilchez (2004). Ensoñación y construcción del lugar en Madinat al-Zahra. *Op. Cit.*, p. 324.

<sup>5</sup> Manuel Ación Almansa (1995). Materiales e hipótesis para una interpretación del Salón de Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir, in *Madinat al-Zahra. El Salón de Abd al-Rahman III*. Córdoba: Junta de Andalucía, Consejería de Cultura, pp. 189-190.

<sup>6</sup> Maribel Fierro (2004). «Madinat al-Zahra, el Paraíso y los fatimíes», *Al-Qantara*, xxv, 2, pp. 316-325.

<sup>7</sup> As expressed by María Antonia Martínez Núñez and Manuel Ación Almansa (2004). «La epigrafía de Madinat al-Zahra», *Cuadernos de Madinat al-Zahra*, v, pp. 123-126.

building materials it was necessary to locate its supply source and have quick access to it and other supplies such as water. Furthermore, mobilizing a large labor force to carry out different structural functions was vital, from the most basic jobs to the most specialized requiring experts, and similarly there were significant efforts that went into systematizing and normalizing all the structural processes and procedures along with the implementation of a complex organizational structure to manage and control these processes, supervising not only the work and installation of materials, but also the conception and the cutting of different elements comprising the variety of adornments. The simultaneous set-up of such heterogeneous tasks meant that a huge amount of economic resources had to be provided, annually, throughout the prolonged period of time written sources set at 40 years — 25 during the Caliphate of ‘Abd al-Rahman III and 15 during his the Caliphate of his son, al-Hakam II.<sup>8</sup> These were all characteristics that Madinat al-Zahra shared with other large, imperial urban projects from the Abbasid and Fatimid worlds, such as Baghdad and the diverse cities of Samarra, Sabra-Mansuriyya and Cairo. These cities also shared one main characteristic: being caliphal-founded cities that were meticulously planned in every aspect to become the capitals of their respective States — from the decision on their location and the management of the works to the last stage in the whole structural and decorative process.

The concept of the city is unequivocally eastern in the sheer size of its dimensions — a rectangle of 1,545 by 745 m that encloses a surface of 112 ha— as well as the perfection of its geometric form — a double square— the enormity of the Alcázar, where the power resides — calculated at 19 h and located at the highest point of the urban center— the rigid separation between this and the rest of the *medina* and the relationship of hierarchy and command of one over the other (Illustration 1).



Illustration 1. General floor plan of Madinat al-Zahra. Scale model.

Source: Conjunto Arqueológico Madinat al-Zahra (The Archaeological Ensemble of Madinat al-Zahra).

<sup>8</sup> On the information provided by written sources, see Ana Labarta and Carmen Barceló (1987). «Las fuentes árabes sobre al-Zahra: estado de la cuestión», *Cuadernos de Madinat al-Zahra*, 1, pp. 96-98; Mohamed Meouak (2004). «Madinat al-Zahra en las fuentes árabes del Occidente islámico», *Cuadernos de Madinat al-Zahra*, v, pp. 70-73; and José Miguel Puerta Vilchez (2004). Ensoñación y construcción del lugar en Madinat al-Zahra. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 320-322.

That said, in the initial urban creation of the Alcázar the adaptation to the topography, the environment and the mountain predominates over rigid planning without any kind of previous topographical determinants. This circumstance shaped the city's planning and brought about the construction of a system of stepped levels that allowed each building to be placed in the exact position that was desired in relation to the rest and in accordance with a rigorous hierarchy: the Caliph on the upper level, the crown prince and Administration offices on the lowest step and, at the base of the hierarchical structure, the general population and servants (Image 1). The whole city is designed to be viewed from the south, from the Guadalquivir valley, the place the buildings faces towards and from which the main road comes from, built to connect the new city with the old Cordoba and the rest of al-Andalus.<sup>9</sup>

The success of a construction program of this magnitude and the extraordinary speed lays in the easy access of the basic building materials; the nearby land was used as the main source of supply for these materials, particularly the calcarenite stone extracted from the strip (from miocene limestone found in the area) connecting the valley and the mountains. Apart from marble, the other rocks used in the building process, for instance the violet-coloured limestone, the black and reddish shafts, and the white limestone also used on the carving of plant motifs, also reveal a local origin, with the main supply area of stone resources located in a radius of 50 km around the city. The proximity of these resources to Madinat al-Zahra and the straightforwardness of the extraction explain the extraordinary speed of the work that the archaeological research validates.<sup>10</sup>



Image 1. Terraced structure of Madinat al-Zahra.

Source: The Archaeological Ensemble of Madinat al-Zahra.

<sup>9</sup> The landscaping principles of the site have been studied by Florencio Zoido Naranjo (2005). *Dimensión paisajística de Madinat al-Zahra*. Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, Grupo de Investigación Consejería de Cultura; and José Ramón Menéndez de Luarda Navia-Osorio (2000). El Plan Especial de Madinat al-Zahra: una nueva estrategia de protección territorial, in Antonio Vallejo (coord.). *Madinat al-Zahra, 1985-2000: 15 años de recuperación*. Cordoba: Junta de Andalucía, Consejería de Cultura, pp. 57-83.

<sup>10</sup> The aspects related to the supply of rocks have been looked at by Antonio Vallejo Triano (2009). Madinat al-Zahra: la construcción de una ciudad califal, in AA. VV. *Construir la ciudad en la Edad Media. VI Encuentros Internacionales del Medievo: del 28 al 31 de julio, Nájera 2009*. Nájera (La Rioja): Ayuntamiento de Nájera, pp. 506-511.

The supply of water was guaranteed by the restoration of an old aqueduct from Roman times that flowed around the nearby area and the construction of new elements that replaced those that had disappeared in the pre-existing system, for instance the Valdepuentes caliphal aqueduct bridge, a true gem in Islamic engineering. Equally, an important road network was also planned, guaranteeing communication with the city of Cordoba through three main roads; from this road infrastructure at least two complete caliphal bridges and the foundations of others have been conserved, thus attesting to the magnitude of the network.

### *THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CITY: THE MEDINA AND ALCÁZAR*

The urban image of the city acquired from recent investigations verifies the absence of large symmetries and the large central axes, which characterize the palaces and urban centers of the East, particularly from the Abbasid structures. Therefore, this has led to Madinat al-Zahra being considered an indigenous and locally implemented project, carried out by an exclusively Andalusí labor force, that shared no similarities with the architectural principles around at the time.<sup>11</sup> This statement can be accepted to explain the beginnings of its construction, although, as we will see below, the models of this architecture were introduced and became generalized after the urban reform of the city and the palace in the middle of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, just 15 years after its initial establishment.

The area of the *medina* was built gradually, particularly the urban hamlets, the housing of the populace, but not the manufacturing infrastructures of the State, which we know, via the sources we possess, moved from Cordoba together with the mint in 947.<sup>12</sup> There is also clear evidence that the *medina* underwent urban planning, with the noteworthy presence of a wide non-urbanized area in the center and the existence of large «official» buildings on the far west side, together with two mosques. Equally, research gives rise to the conclusion that, in contrast to the Alcázar, around which there was a wall from the beginning, the rest of the *medina* was open and unfenced for a considerable number of years, at least until the latter stages of the Caliphate of ‘Abd al-Rahman III or the beginning of the reign of al-Hakam II. This is demonstrated by the recently excavated southern wall, which had to be modified and aligned abruptly in order to not block or bring about the destruction of a small neighborhood mosque, also excavated, with a chronology corresponding to the first constructions in Madinat al-Zahra, around 940, implying that the fence came later. Therefore, contrary to appearances, the wall was not the first part of the city’s structural process.

<sup>11</sup> Christian Ewert (1991). «Precursores de Madinat al-Zahra. Los palacios omeyas y abbasíes de Oriente y su ceremonial áulico», *Cuadernos de Madinat al-Zahra*, III, p. 125.

<sup>12</sup> The date the mint was moved is corroborated by the numismatic registry. Please see Alberto Canto García (1991). «De la ceca Al-Andalus a la de Madinat al-Zahra», *Cuadernos de Madinat al-Zahra*, 3, particularly pp. 114-116.

The extensive area designated to the Alcázar, of which 11 ha have been excavated from a total hypothetical land surface of 19 ha, also provides evidence of precise urban planning, particularly apparent in the water supply and sanitation infrastructures.

The palace, not the *medina*, had a constant supply of water for consumption and hygiene as well as other productive functions from the Valdepuentes aqueduct, which, lacking underground cisterns or wells to store the rainwater, evacuated it directly to the drainage system. From the main duct of the aqueduct the water flowed to the different buildings through lead pipes, and, to a lesser extent, clay pipes. In the majority of the dwellings, supplies for consumption were located in the center of the courtyard, thus generating a wealth of fixtures that featured a considerable number of marble basins with diverse morphologies, including a significant collection of reused Roman sarcophagi, and water dispensers, such as the well-known bronze fawn.<sup>13</sup>

Besides this circuit designed for consumption and domestic activity, there is also another that differed from the previous inasmuch as its main aim was the supply of water to the latrines. It is possible to affirm that these were some of the key pieces of the palace's hygiene system, as much through its advanced design, with a permanent water system that guaranteed cleanliness and hygiene for the user, as the sheer quantity that were found in all of the Alcázar buildings. All of these things have a highly characteristic morphology and layouts, prototypical in Andalusí architecture and particularly unique associated fixtures that include marble basins in the form of an inverted trough.

Together with the water supply, the sanitation infrastructure is among the best in the palace in terms of planning. It is integrated by a network of underground channels, out of which 1,800 m have been recognized, with diverse typologies and sizes that run into different areas of depth beneath the palace buildings. The larger ones longitudinally cover the different terraces and building nuclei, traversing the center of the dwellings to collect rain water and waste from the courtyards, while the smaller ones transport water from service ducts, latrines and other elements of drainage that are emptied into the bigger ones.

This infrastructure is incomparable to others we know of in other large coeval urban centers since it spread around the whole of the palace and provided sanitation to every building, guaranteeing the removal of wastewater to nearby streams or those outside the city. Another, secondary, function was its use as a dumping site for domestic waste and in this piping system a large part of the material record we are able to identify as broken ceramics and foodstuffs is found.

This sanitation infrastructure also had one pre-existing element: the piping system from the old Roman aqueduct. This ran below the central part of the upper platform of the palace, where we have been able to recognize its layout in a rectilinear route of over 200 m. In this section, and after losing its original supply function, the aqueduct was reused in

<sup>13</sup> As is well known, one of the two bronze fawns from Madinat al-Zahra can be found in the museum of the caliphal city and the other in the Doha museum (Qatar).

the palace as a large sewer, shown by the large volume of waste material concentrated in its basin.<sup>14</sup>

The stepped layout of the palace also has conditioned its interior communications, based on a series of roads, streets and passages with uneven slopes that in some cases reach gradients of 20%. By and large these streets were covered and marked by doors and terraced ledges. Some of them were paved with materials that were appropriate for the transit of the cavalry, and, equally, the terraced structure contributed to the construction of multiple and diverse types of stairways linking the adjacent steps.

From an urban planning perspective, the Alcázar demonstrates a conglomerate of diverse types of buildings: residential, religious, administrative, work and service, and reception, and also has community spaces (large squares) and extensive gardens, some of the most well conserved in the early Islamic world. Functionally, they all make up a well-articulated and coherent whole, despite being built and/or reformed at different times, from the beginnings of their foundations —around 940— to the second decade of the Caliphate of al-Hakam II —around 972— the period in which the last reforms are documented.<sup>15</sup>

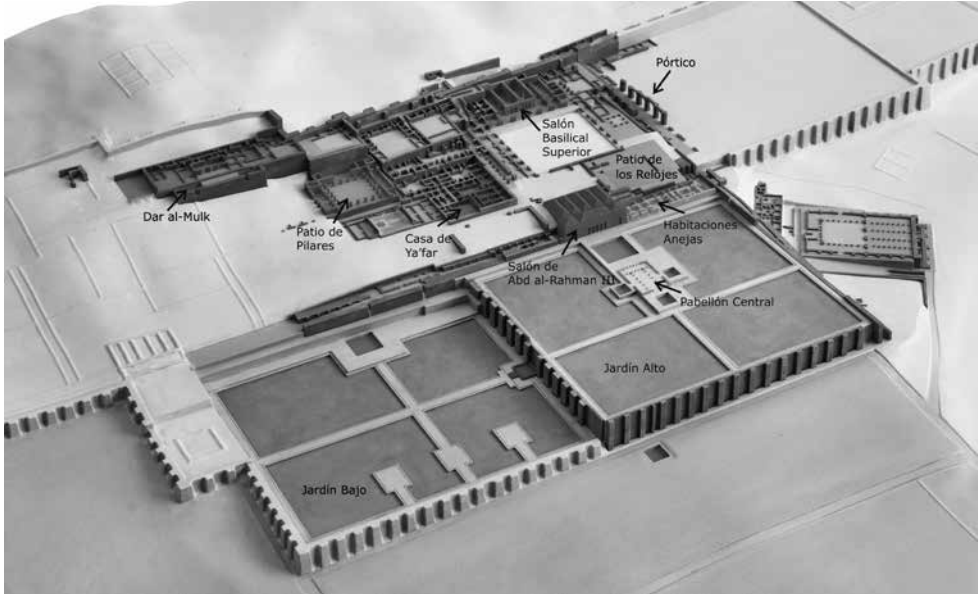
Among the buildings designed for residency, three stand out for their caliphal uses: in the texts what is called Dar al-Mulk ('the Royal House'), which was the residency of 'Abd al-Rahman III; what was known as the Dwellings of the Pool, which we have identified as the residence of the Caliph al-Hakam II, built when he was still the crown prince,<sup>16</sup> and what was referred to as the Rooms Adjacent to the Drawing Room of 'Abd al-Rahman III (Illustration 2). These are three of the most important and unique residences in the Alcázar, in terms of both their size and architectural design, which included an individual bathroom in each of them, a large garden in the one belonging to al-Hakam and the plant motifs adornment. These must also be joined by the dwelling of the all-powerful *hayib* ('prime minister') of the Caliph State, Ya'far al-Siqlabi, an architectural structure that contains reception and workspaces, private bedrooms and servants quarters (Image 2).

<sup>14</sup> The aspects related to supplies and sanitation can be consulted in Antonio Vallejo Triano (2010). *La ciudad califal de Madinat al-Zahra. Arqueología de su arquitectura*. Córdoba: Almuzara, pp. 228-260.

<sup>15</sup> The first reliable mention of the building work in Madinat al-Zahra refers to the construction of the Alcázar in 940-941 and the paving of the road to al-Zahra from almunia al-Naura: Ibn Hayyan (1981). *Crónica del califa Abdarrahman III an-Nasir entre los años 912 y 942 (al-Muqtabis V)* [translation, notes and index by María Jesús Viguera Molins and Federico Corriente]. Zaragoza: Anubar, Instituto Hispano-Arabe de Cultura, p. 359. More recent reports allude to restorations in Dar al-Mulk in 972 to adapt the residence to a place of study for prince Hisham: Ibn Hayyan (1967). *Anales palatinos del califa de Córdoba al-Hakam II, por Isa ibn Ahmad al-Razi (360-364 H. = 971-975 J. C.)* [translated by Emilio García Gómez]. Madrid: Sociedad de Estudios y Publicaciones, pp. 99-100.

<sup>16</sup> Antonio Vallejo Triano (2010). *La ciudad califal de Madinat al-Zahra. Arqueología de su arquitectura*. Op. Cit., p. 468.

Illustration 2. General view of the Alcázar indicating the most representative buildings and spaces. Scale model.



Source: The Archaeological Ensemble of Madinat al-Zahra.

Image 2. The House of Ya'far. Main façade with plant motif adornments.



Source: The Archaeological Ensemble of Madinat al-Zahra.



### *THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESSES OF THE ALCÁZAR*

Madinat al-Zahra grew and developed at the same pace as the evolution of the caliphal institutions and the State; therefore, this explains how, together with these dwellings, the most important buildings in the palace are administrative and, more importantly, were used as the Caliph's political reception hall. It is exactly these constructions that reflect the profound changes that came about in the urban planning and architecture of the Alcázar halfway through the decade of 950, changes that appeared to have a double aim: on one side the centralization of the administrative institutions of the State, and, on the other, the adaptation of the palace for new representational forms of caliphal power.

A large number of the buildings we can identify as administrative were built at this time and were located in the center of the palace, which was set up as the headquarters of caliphal office following the demolition of the pre-existent buildings (Illustration 2). Among these new and unusually sized buildings, never seen in Madinat al-Zahra until this point, the ones that stand out are the Basilica Room on the upper terrace, which we have identified, hypothetically, with what is referred to as Dar al-Yund (the 'Military House') in our sources, and a large building with a quadrangular floor built around a courtyard with a series of pillars on only two sides, conventionally known as the 'Courtyard of the Clocks' and which we have identified, hypothetically, with the so-called Dar al-Wusara (the 'House of the Viziers').

The first is located at the front of a large square and was accessible for the cavalry and was adapted to the wide range of processional movements around which the palace's other administrative spaces are congregated. This building played an important role in the development of the caliph ceremonies, and, if it has been correctly identified, was the place where certain groups waited, in hierarchical order, to be received by the Caliph in the political reception hall; specifically the ambassadors that were going to be granted a hearing and the Quraish, members of the tribe the governing Umayyad family originated from.<sup>17</sup>

Located nearby, the House of the Viziers, where the State offices were situated: inside credentials are issued that certify property or the possession of determined land or strongholds, and services rendered to the obedience of the caliph and for the security of the State are rewarded with diverse types of gifts or money; therefore, this is an eminently administrative place, with rostrums for the viziers and archives for political documentation.

The group of houses that materialized in this terrace demonstrates the strong administrative centralization that must be linked to the reorganization of the services of the State, set in motion by 'Abd al-Rahman III in the year 955.<sup>18</sup> This reform must also be related to the naming of the figure of *hayib* in the first year of the Caliphate of al-Hakam, who is to

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 494.

<sup>18</sup> This reform involved dividing the whole caliphal administration into four large offices, each one remaining under the control of a vizier. The information provided by Ibn Idari has been acknowledged by a range of authors, including Mohamed Meouak (1999). *Pouvoir souverain, administration centrale et élites politiques dans l'Espagne umayyade (Ile-IVe/VIIIe-Xe siècles)*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, pp. 36-47 and 55-56.

take responsibility of the highest caliphal administrative system, resulting in the construction of a residence that is worthy of his status. This extensive residence, belonging to *hayib* Ya'far al-Siqlabi, has three different architectural areas and was established on a space previously occupied by three houses that were demolished.<sup>19</sup>

If the transformation of the upper terrace with the installation of the State's administrative center was an important one, then the implementation of the lower platform of the palace was monumental. Before there were diverse structures — a garden with its network of irrigation ditches and at least one pool — that were completely modified to form the extraordinary court terrace, still conserved in the present day. It comprised the Drawing Room of 'Abd al-Rahman III at the front, a building in the central axis that completely disappeared through plundering and was surrounded by four pools, and the Central Pavilion, a wing of living quarters adjoining the drawing room on the north-east side that was completely immersed in a huge, quadrangular-shaped and flat garden (Illustration 2).

The key piece of this terrace was the political reception hall, built by the Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III between the years 953 and 957, as accredited by his extensive epigraph (Image 3). Sources identify this building with *maylis al-sarqi* ('the Eastern Room'), the setting where the majority of embassy hearings were held as well as the two big annual religious festivals in Islam — *id al-fitr* ('the Feast of Breaking the Fast') and *id al-adha* ('the Feast of Sacrifice') — during the final years of the reign of 'Abd al-Rahman III and during the government of the Caliph al-Hakam II.<sup>20</sup> It was here that some of the most important dignitaries of the time passed through: not only from the Mediterranean world but also the Germanic Empire and Christian Kingdoms from the peninsular, which included, among others, the Kingdom of Toda of Navarre, Sancho el Craso, The King of León Ordoño IV, the ambassadors of Borrell the Count of Barcelona, the ambassadors of the Count of Castilla, the ambassador of the Byzantine Emperor John I Tzimiskes, and, on repeated occasions, different representatives of the Idrisid Banu Hassan, who passed to the obedience of the Caliph.

<sup>19</sup> Antonio Vallejo Triano, Alberto J. Montejo Córdoba y Andrés García Cortés (2004). «Resultados preliminares de la intervención arqueológica en la llamada 'Casa de Ya'far' y en el edificio de 'Patio de los Pilares' en Madinat al-Zahra», *Cuadernos de Madinat al-Zahra*, v, pp. 199-239.

<sup>20</sup> Antonio Vallejo Triano (2010). *La ciudad califal de Madinat al-Zahra. Arqueología de su arquitectura*. Op. Cit., p.496.

Image 3. Inside the Drawing Room of Abd al-Rahman III.



Source: The Archaeological Ensemble of Madinat al-Zahra.

The most unique part of the building is undoubtedly the extraordinary adornment spanning the wall surfaces, including the façade, which are structured in three registers. The most important innovations were condensed in the lower area, between the marble plinth and the beginning of the arches, where more than seventy large stone panels with arborescent compositions clearly inspired by nature with the ubiquitous root, a central stem that becomes an axis of symmetry crowned with a cup and a framework of stalks providing the structure of the foliage. These panels, often identified as trees of life, comprise one of the most important collections of Islamic art throughout the ages; they were associated with a new and extraordinarily rich and varied vegetation art, whereby practically no two identical motifs are repeated and in which clear Abbasid influences can be discerned along with the way it was rendered, clearly not from al-Andalus, but more likely originating from an art center with strong links to the East. This adornment, which also includes an upper frieze with a motif of stars symbolizing the universe, has been interpreted in astrological code as the scene that legitimizes the Caliph as the first governor that orders and directs the natural world and power structure through an hierarchical order that emanates from rest of the State.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See Manuel Ación Almansa (1995). *Materiales e hipótesis para una interpretación del Salón de Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir*. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 188-191; Manuel Ación Almansa (1998). «Sobre el papel de la ideología en la caracterización de las formaciones sociales. La formación social islámica», *Hispania*, LVIII (200), pp. 949-968; and Antonio Vallejo Triano (2010). *La ciudad califal de Madinat al-Zahra. Arqueología de su arquitectura*. *Op. Cit.*, p. 464.

The ceremonies in the caliphal *maylis* adhere to a rigid protocol of positions and movements that reflect the Abbasid and Fatimid ceremonies and are aimed to magnify the figure of the Caliph.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, it was not only limited to the inside of the room, where only the hearing was held, it also affected the whole terrace, particularly the Central Pavilion, which played an important role in the whole ceremony process. Beyond it, the rest of the city was involved in these celebrations by virtue of the organized processions that passed through as they accompanied the embassies. The general setting for these performances, the palace and the city as a whole, were also modified in the decade of 950 to magnify its spectacular nature and propaganda effect.

On one hand the Alcázar was expanded significantly towards the east, lengthening with it the procession route that mobilized a huge amount of men, from the different units of the Army to the Caliph Administration and the populace, equipped especially for the entourage.<sup>23</sup> Inside the Alcázar the route culminated in the political reception hall (*'maylis al-sarqi'*) and before it arrived had three intermediary stages: one of which was the Bab al-Sudda ('the Threshold Gate'), identified as the great 14-arch portico, four of which have been reconstructed. The ceremonial gate also emerged from this restoration.

### DECLINE AND ABANDONMENT

We do not have any proof of the construction of new buildings or modifications to the previous ones after the death of al-Hakam II and the naming of his son, Hisham II, as Caliph in the year 976; nor do we know about the celebration of new receptions in the palace, meaning that all political and ceremonial activity disappeared from Madinat al-Zahra. This would indicate that the city remained fossilized and, from this moment on, began the decadence, first symbolic and subsequently effective, when in 978 Ibn Abi Amir, known as Almanzor and named *hayib*, held royal control of the State and began the construction of a new palatine city to the east of Cordoba, Madinat al-Zahira, to which the caliphal Administration was transferred. The information that followed, outlining that the city once again acquired prominence, refer to the *fitna* between 1010-1013, with the partial occupation of the *medina* by troops from one of the Caliphate's contenders, Sulayman al-Mustain, and the successive assaults and sackings that occurred until the eventual abandonment by the people that still lived within its walls. From this moment onwards a new phase begins, the subject of poetic yearnings and the plundering that, to differing degrees and depending

<sup>22</sup> For the protocol inside the Drawing Room, see Miquel Barceló Perelló (1995). «El Califa patente: el ceremonial omeya de Córdoba o la escenificación del poder», in *Madinat al-Zahra. El Salón de Abd al-Rahman III*. Córdoba: Junta de Andalucía, Consejería de Cultura, pp. 155-175.

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, the military '*albaruz*' (parade) in September 971 to celebrate the arrival of the Banu Jazar in Cordoba and Madinat al-Zahra. Ibn Hayyan (1967). *Anales palatinos del califa de Córdoba al-Hakam II, por Isa ibn Ahmad al-Razi (360-364 H. = 971-975 J. C.)*. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 64-74.

on the nature of the materials, would remain until at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century. During this lengthy period the ruins of the abandoned city were attributed to the Roman period and were thus known as '*Córdoba la vieja*' (the old Cordoba) up until their definitive identification, in 1832, as Madinat al-Zahra, the city built by the Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III.

### THE RESTORATION OF HERITAGE

The image of Madinat al-Zahra put forward above, or more to the point, what we know of the caliphal city, does not hinge on information obtained from Arab sources but rather on the meticulous research carried out from the beginning of the excavations in 1911 by various generations of researchers.

Contrary to other monumental ensembles, which have reached the present day pretty much intact, Madinat al-Zahra can only be understood as the result of archaeological research that was put into practice one century ago on the site of the ancient Umayyad palatine city. What can be seen at Madinat al-Zahra today is the outcome of prolonged archaeological work performed by various generations of experts carrying out their research at the heart of the heritage institution itself, which manages the archaeological site, and in other academic spheres. This irrefutable fact, which breathes life into the Archaeological Ensemble of Madinat al-Zahra and enables it to attract thousands of visitors every year to congregate there, is the interpretation that historical and archaeological research has been able to provide on the ancient Umayyad palatine metropolis. Without this interpretation Madinat al-Zahra would simply not exist.

### THE BEGINNINGS

Since Ricardo Velázquez Bosco began working there, the labors carried out throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been huge. Basically, the excavations have taken place in the central part of the palace and have been onerous due to the high levels of rubble burying the structures (in some places between 5 and 6 m) and the intensity of the plundering of archaeological structures, causing only the foundations of some of the buildings to be conserved, or worse still, the ditches supporting them. From the 1930s onwards, this situation forced a project of systematic screeding to be set up for the structures by using broken ashlar fragments that appeared in the excavation. It started with the north wall of the city and the retaining walls from the different terraces and then subsequently moved on to all of the constructions. Consequently, the outlines of the Alcázar's urban planning and its different structures became more defined and gained volume until an image of the stepped structure of the palace and the different constructions we know today were obtained. The efforts of these early years both in terms of the site and the identification of some of the elements of the area associated with Madinat al-Zahra were reflected in the protection granted as a National Historic Site, in 1923, and the caliphal Valdepuentes aqueduct and Almunia of Alamiriya, in 1931.

In parallel with these works, others were carried out to recompose the materials, particularly the architectural adornments — the plant motifs. The main buildings in Madinat al-Zahra, particularly the caliphal reception halls and the dwellings, feature adornments that were carved from a stone that was different from the one used for construction and have come into our hands incomplete and fragmentary, broken into thousands of fragments that emerged from the levels of destruction of these buildings. The restoration of the Drawing Room of ‘Abd al-Rahman III, the great throne room of the Umayyad Caliphate excavated in 1944, was a huge research and work project in Madinat al-Zahra in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still continues, inconclusive, to this day. After the excavation a complex process of study, identification and recomposition of the different materials began, ending in the definition of different structural elements: panels, keystones, spandrels, alfiz structures, borders, friezes... allowing the architecture to be reconstructed and considered before proceeding with returning the material to its original, safe or hypothetical location. This highly complex and skilled task, got underway and developed by Félix Hernández and then subsequently continued by Rafael Manzano and ourselves (in recent years), has been supported by the work of other professionals, including distinguished names such as the Arabist Manuel Ocaña and restorer Salvador Escobar. Both continued to advance in the research started by Hernández until the beginning of the new regional phase in which their collaboration was continued, establishing an authentic bridge and channel for transmitting the knowledge acquired throughout this process of restoration.

### *INSTITUTIONAL CONSOLIDATION*

From 1985 onwards a new phase of work began under the regional Administration, the Junta de Andalucía (Regional Government of Andalusia), and its corresponding office, which was characterized by:

- The institutionalization of the site’s management with the creation of a heritage institution called the Archaeological Ensemble that guarantees continued protected administrative action on the site.
- The interest placed in the knowledge and conservation of the territory, and, as a result, the instruments of protection by means of the declaration of an archaeological site and the drafting of a Special Protection Plan in compliance with the Spanish Heritage Act 16/85. The site is a protected area of around 1500 ha, which along with the remains of the city, includes the surrounding area, with a highly important landscape and heritage, and the location of the historical and territorial planning of Madinat al-Zahra, made up of bridges, aqueducts and fragments of roads and other archaeological sites.
- The emphasis placed on research as the driving force behind an extraordinarily complex site that is little more than a collection of meaningless structures without it.

Thus research is considered as a process to guide the development of the interventions to be carried out.

- The conviction that heritage management must be sustainable<sup>24</sup> and must strike the right balance between different responsibilities: the administration, protection, investigation, conservation and promotion. Any imbalance in this equilibrium implying the greater development of one to the detriment of the rest will involve necessary changes in the guardianship of the site.
- The consideration that promotion must be based on the transfer of knowledge from the research area and must contribute to transferring and expanding the multiple values of every kind that concur in the city, as well as the elimination of platitudes that cast a shadow on the various meanings.

This drive towards research has brought about notable advances on three working levels. On a territorial level with the uniqueness and characteristics of the site and the implementation conditions of the urban center, assessing the aspects of topography and landscape as a key part of the urban project of Madinat al-Zahra. Equally, in this area there have been advances in the recognition of the basic infrastructures created by the city for its development. On an urban level, from the city as a whole a complete image has been created with functional zoning, unknown until now (Illustration 1). What is noteworthy is the hierarchical relationship between the Alcázar and the *medina* and the verification of rigid interior planning that explains, among other things, the existence of large, non-urban areas in the center of the *medina*, areas that were never built and correspond to the meridional façade of the palace.

In recent years, research into the Alcázar on a micro-spacial level has enabled the formulation of a global and coherent explanation of the structures it is composed of, stressing the organic articulation of its different buildings, the coherence in its planning, its different stages of construction —from the foundation to its abandonment— and, above all, the importance and magnitude of the restoration processes and change, which deeply modified the palatial physiognomy.

In terms of conservation, in the last two decades Madinat al-Zahra has developed a restoration strategy that aims to order and sequence the intervention of the different spaces, previously closed to visitors, that make up the palace's residential area in order to facilitate public access. In these buildings a comprehensive intervention model was drawn up that dealt with all of the construction elements, from the structures and walls to the furniture and fixtures, epidermal art and adornments. Ultimately, the aim is to improve conservation and provide an interpretation of the buildings that demonstrates the ensemble of unique characteristics and specifications they are distinguished by, thus providing an aesthetic,

<sup>24</sup> This implies that it must be governed by three basic principles: each action must be based on rigorous research, must be reversible and must take into account future generations.

intellectual and sensory experience that brings about contact with their original capacity and the perception of space and materials on this site in their original functions.

This kind of intervention has been recognized internationally through the Europa Nostra in 2004 award given to the restoration of the House of Ya'far.

This method of holistic intervention has evolved in recent years, reflected in a new intervention in the Drawing Room of 'Abd al-Rahman III, which is now part of the first stage of restoration designed solve the problems with damp affecting the building, and, as a result, its decoration. The excavation carried out has enabled us to gain an idea of the rocky substratum the room sits upon as well as the total number of lines cut in the marble slabs. The intervention also included the placement of a new flooring made from this material that originated from the Estremoz quarries (Portugal), where this marble comes from, that combines the original pieces still conserved from the building.

One of the most important milestones in recent years has been the exhibition *El esplendor de los Omeyas cordobeses* ('The Splendour of the Umayyads of Cordoba'), held in 2001. In spite of it being preceded by a similar exhibition Paris, a set of landmark pieces were assembled for the first time, enabling a more in-depth look into the different aspects of the dynasty and its artistic, scientific and literary output, which were represented in two publications.<sup>25</sup> One of the most important outcomes of the exhibition was the acknowledgement and exposure of Madinat al-Zahra on a national and international level, seen in the high number of visitors from different countries.

### THE NEW MUSEUM

The future development strategy of Madinat al-Zahra is represented by its new museum;<sup>26</sup> the need for this infrastructure had been considered since the beginning of the excavations, started at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Ricardo Velázquez Bosco, and had been subsequently reiterated by different figures in charge of the site —the commission that continued up to the death of the aforementioned architect to Félix Hernández, and more recently Rafael Manzano. The first ones provided a provisional answer to this necessity with the construction of a small building located next the entrance of the site, while Rafael Manzano attempted to utilize the actual archaeological structure as a container for collection material and also started the reconstruction of the Upper Basilica Room for the museum; work that eventually ended inconclusive.

<sup>25</sup> Please refer to Volume I of María Jesús Viguera Molins and Concepción Castillo Castillo (coords.) (2001). «El esplendor de los omeyas cordobeses: la civilización musulmana de Europa occidental. Exposición en Madinat al-Zahra, 3 de mayo a 30 de septiembre de 2001: estudios». Granada: Consejería de Cultura, through the Fundación El Legado Andalusi; and Volume II of the same work, by Rafael López Guzmán and Antonio Vallejo Triano (coords.) (2001). Catálogo de piezas. Barcelona: Juan Carlos Luna Briñardeli.

<sup>26</sup> The different aspects related to the museum can be consulted in Antonio Vallejo Triano (2011). Un Museo para Madinat al-Zahra, in *Consejo Internacional de Museos. 6º Encuentro Internacional. Actualidad en Museografía: Bilbao del 17 al 20 de junio de 2010*. Madrid: ICOM-España. Consejo Internacional de Museos, pp. 105-123.



To this imperative end, in the 1990s a Building Use Program was devised with the formulation of three main objectives:

- To explain the history of Madinat al-Zahra and its multiple values through the transfer of knowledge produced by new research that will also allow the constant updating and renovation of promotion activities.
- To house the whole collection of archaeological materials unearthed from the excavation work through the safekeeping and presentation in both the exhibition rooms and storage spaces as well as the reservation areas.
- To have spaces and resources available that are suitable for developing the diverse potential of the site as well as the laboratories, restoration workshops, library...

To write the project a global ideas forum was held and subsequently won by the architects Fuensanta Nieto and Enrique Sobejano with their concept of a building shaped in a rectangle, with minimalist architecture and a surface area of 7,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Work began in 2005 and it was unveiled in October 2009.

The museum is located on the outside of the wall that encloses the caliphal city and alongside the route of one of the main access roads, now completely disappeared, in such a way that it does not condition or compromise future excavations (Image 4).<sup>27</sup> One of its most salient, and obvious, assets is the way it has been installed in the area: if the place that was previously chosen gave some indications as to the precautions that had to be adopted regarding the site's landscape resources, the project intelligently delved deeper into this assessment by making a reading of the landscape. It is a 'silent' museum that does not strive to be the center of attention or compete with the city or the land it has been incorporated into; an 'introverted' museum, distinguished by its relationship to the environment and its own interior architecture, characterized by order, purity, and the clarity of its volumes.

Image 4. External view of the Madinat al-Zahra Museum.



Source: The Archaeological Ensemble of Madinat al-Zahra.

<sup>27</sup> The location was decided upon in the Madinat al-Zahra Special Protection Plan, written by the urban planner José Ramón Menéndez de Luarca Navia-Osorio.

The innovation of its museum program lies in the concept of the museum as a unitary ensemble that serves to provide greater and better knowledge of the archaeological site. The whole building can be visited through a circular route that shows and comprises its divergent functional areas, each one providing its own specific meaning to the discourse on the caliphal city — its history, values and restoration.

In the auditorium an audiovisual piece entitled *Madinat al-Zahra: la ciudad brillante* ('Madinat al-Zahra: the Brilliant City'), which explains what Madinat al-Zahra is with the help of virtual reality technical support. Meanwhile, the permanent exhibition is arranged into four inter-related blocks and equipped with extensive technical resources to gain a better understanding of the city's history and its importance in the Mediterranean of the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Image 5). It is made up of 166 original pieces and, via a distinctly educational discourse, explains the general aspects of the historical and cultural context Madinat al-Zahra emerged from in addition to specific information on its construction, the relationship with Cordoba, who the inhabitants were and how they lived in the different areas and how the caliphal city was destroyed.<sup>28</sup>



Image 5. Madinat al-Zahra Museum. Permanent exhibition room.

Source: Roland Halbe's photograph.

Inside the museum some of the best pieces from Islamic culture in the 10<sup>th</sup> century are displayed, and one of its overriding qualities is its conception as an open museum,

<sup>28</sup> The museum's program in the exhibition hall was written by professor Manuel Ación Almansa and represents a clear transfer of knowledge from the field of research to the field of promotion. The museum project is the result of work by the designing architects and the museographer Juan P. Rodríguez Frade.

with a tour through the permanent exhibition complementing the view of the two main warehouses in the interior that house the collection, one made up of stone and marble architectural materials and the other plant motifs. Not only does this set-up enable a large part of the pieces not exhibited to be viewed, it also makes it possible to view the work that goes on inside the institution —the cataloguing of pieces, cleaning, etc.— and developed inside these spaces.

Furthermore, the Madinat al-Zahra Museum has won significant international awards: the architectural excellence of the building, along with the ideas of museum and heritage, have provided the basis for the conceptualization and the museum project itself and were deservedly awarded the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2010. On top of that, more recently, the European Museum Forum, an organization that operates under the auspices of the Council of Europe, gave recognition to its ability to transmit the content and values of the history of Madinat al-Zahra through the quality of its museum and exhibition program by naming it winner of the European Museum of the Year Awards 2012.

### *THE FUTURE*

The museum has opened up new perspectives on the future of Madinat al-Zahra; on the one hand it has massively improved the understanding of the site and, in the process, has produced a significant appreciation of Madinat al-Zahra on every level (social, educational, scientific...) as, among other things, it has begun to make its historical, urban, architectural and technical relevance known, along with its complexity and potential.

And on the other, the varied nature of the museum's explanatory resources has raised the need to rethink the interpretive and explanatory resources of the actual site so that they are complementary and not surplus to requirements. Certain aspects can be better explained in the museum through the furniture materials and adequate resources as well as others that require an *in situ* explanation with specific instruments and supports; this means that the site must be the subject of museological conservation in the coming years.

The museum's location also has to be used as an intervention and restoration strategy for the city area and meridional zone of Madinat al-Zahra; its position as the gateway to the city from the south by making use of one of the original entrance gates means that over the coming years part of the excavations and intervention must be considered in this area in order to obtain a walkway between the museum and the city via the southern wall and the *medina* area.

The establishment of this connection, which must be considered as one of the Archaeological Ensemble's strategic objectives, began in 2007 with the excavation of one section of the south wall and its adjacent structures. This must also give rise to one of the biggest and most ambitious projects in Spain in the coming years, the exhibition of the area of the *medina* not yet excavated; namely, we have to bring about the connection between the excavated palace and the museum through a route around a city which, although has still not

been excavated, should at least indicate the most important aspects in its urban planning (roads, buildings, urban grid elements, vacant constructions, farming spaces...) in such a way that we will be able to recognize the topological location and, generally speaking, its morphology in order that this pathway allows the sensory and aesthetic experience to be relived as well as an awareness of what the gradual approach from the south to the main seat of power meant.

Today Madinat al-Zahra is a site with enormous potential, not just because of the exceptional nature of the buildings that have seen the light of day, but also due to the expansive area yet to be excavated, approximately 90%.

There is also the need in the future for consistent and comprehensive conservation and restoration programs and the enhancement of the site and its archaeological collection, which has now been preserved for a number of years. Furthermore, there is the need to develop Madinat al-Zahra and its Museum as a research and training center through the direct collaboration with benchmark institutions and universities in the field of archaeology, the study of the medieval world, and the extensive field of intervention and heritage restoration.

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Antonio Vallejo Triano, with a Bachelor's degree in Medieval History from the University of Málaga and a PhD from the University of Jaén, has been Director of the Archaeological Ensemble of Madinat al-Zahra from 1985 to 2013 and is member of honor of the German Archaeological Institute. He is also editor of the magazine *Cuadernos de Madinat al-Zahra*, and the author of numerous general and monographic publications on Madinat al-Zahra and the Umayyad Caliphate of Cordoba, notably the book: *La ciudad califal de Madinat al-Zahra. Arqueología de su arquitectura*.

## **ABSTRACT**

This article analyses Madinat al-Zahra from two perspectives: historical/archaeological and heritage. One side, the city is conceptualized as the great urban creation of the Umayyad Caliphate of al-Andalus within the context of its competition with two other rival Caliphates, Abbasid and Fatimid, and the construction of large urban centers in their respective states. In light of archaeological research, there is an analysis of the processes of urban planning and construction that highlights the political objectives manifested in the different urban and architectural transformations the palace underwent from the time it was founded. While on the other, there is an explanation of the restoration process of Madinat al-Zahra from the beginning of the excavations, demonstrating that both the material reality that can be seen at the site today and also the knowledge we possess on the caliphal city are fundamentally the result of archaeological research. There is also an explanation of the most recent landmarks in this restoration process, particularly the construction of the Madinat al-Zahra Museum, and the future that has opened up for the Archaeological Ensemble based on two considerations: firstly, the need to connect the museum to the site and secondly, with 90% of the land surface yet to be excavated, research as the driving force behind Madinat al-Zahra, without which the site would remain fossilized as little more than a tourist center.

## **KEYWORDS**

Qurtuba, Cordoba, Madinat al-Zahra.