

Rosario Arquero Avilés
Gonzalo Marco Cuenca

MEDINA AZAHARA.

The "Shining City", Yesterday and Today.



It was Abderramán III (al-Nasir), father of al-Hakam II who, after his proclamation as Caliph of Cordoba on 16 January 929, decided to establish a palatine city (Castejón & Martínez de Arizala, 1976; Torremocha Silva, 2023) and to begin the construction of Madinat al-Zahra (Medina Azahara), which was to be conceived as a symbol of the political and religious power of the Independent Caliphate of the West: the Umayyad Caliphate of al-Andalus (Manzano Moreno, 2024).

Some legends say that Abderramán III gave it the name of Zahara, his favourite wife. The truth is that, with the start of its construction, Abderramán III, prince of the believers, was fulfilling his obligation, as a good ruler, to create a city of splendour after having proclaimed himself Caliph and after having pacified al-Andalus (Martínez Enamorado, 2001). Accordingly, the city was built as the centre of government, political, and military power in the Cordoba of the Umayyads, the peak of Western Islamic civilisation in al-Andalus (UNESCO, 2018).

The so-called "Shining City" or Medina Azahara, began to be built on 19 November 936, located some 8 kilometres west of Cordoba, at the foot of the Yebel al-arús, or the Bride's Mount, as it was called by the Arab chroniclers (Castejón & Martínez de Arizala, 1976; Martínez Enamorado, 2001), in the Sierra de Córdoba.

It was the capital of al-Andalus at the time of its greatest magnificence, during the almost 25 years of the reign of Abderramán III, the 15 years of his son al-Hakam II and the first years of his grandson, heir and successor, Hisham II (Castejón Calderón, 1980).

Both the descriptions of the Arab authors and the evidence of its archaeological remains confirm that the layout, spaces and rooms of Medina Azahara as a whole, including the palace and its surroundings, were luxurious and sumptuous (Manzano Moreno, 2024).

Medina Azahara had a very short-lived existence. After a prosperous period of approximately 80 years, it was sacked during the civil war of succession in 1009-10, which marked the end of the Umayyad Caliphate's power.

After the death of al-Hakam II in 976, court factions had conspired to place his son Hisham II on the throne, whose 11 years of age precluded a minor from becoming Caliph, according to the rules of Islamic law (Manzano Moreno, 2024). This situation was exploited by the ambitious administrative official, Muhammad ibn Abi Amir (known as Almanzor), who seized absolute control of power.

Although Hishan II was recognised as Caliph, he spent much of his life secluded within the walls of Medina Azahara, isolated and with little contact with his subjects. It was Almanzor who truly held power and, through his policies, altered the foundations of the Caliphate of Cordoba, ultimately leading to its demise in 1031 (Manzano Moreno, 2024).

The remains of Medina Azahara fell into oblivion for more than a thousand years, until their rediscovery by Ricardo Velázquez Bosco, who was appointed Delegate-Director of the excavations that were to be carried out at the expense of the Spanish State in the ruins of the palaces of Medina Azahara (Velázquez Bosco, 1923).

Since 2018, the Caliphate city of Medina Azahara has been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List (UNESCO, 2018). Today it is an archaeological site, whose itinerary begins at the northern wall walkway, where there is a viewpoint from which you can see the Caliphate city and the surrounding area, following a route that goes from the upper to the lower part of the city (*Museos de Andalucía, Conjunto Arqueológico de Medina Azahara, 2025*) and which allows the visitor to approach what must have been the design, spaces and rooms of Medina Azahara in its period of maximum splendour.

The archaeological site also has a museum that opened to the public in 2019, as well as various infrastructures for the management of its heritage, which opened to the public in October 2009 (*Museos de Andalucía, Conjunto Arqueológico de Medina Azahara, 2025*) and which is the starting point for a visit to the archaeological site. The museum has different areas: a cultural, exhibition and didactic area, a conservation and research area and other services.

As part of the cultural, exhibition and didactic area, there is the auditorium, the permanent exhibition in which the most significant pieces from the collection of the Caliphate city are exhibited, as well as the specialised "Manuel Ocaña" Library, whose purpose is to satisfy the informative needs of related institutions and the general public, as well as to serve as an instrument to support scientific research (*Museos de Andalucía, Conjunto Arqueológico de Medina Azahara, 2025*). The library has a collection of documents that mainly focuses on the Islamic world of al-Andalus, with an emphasis on archaeology, covering different fields such as history, art, architecture, epigraphy and numismatics, among others. It also has numerous publications on the rest of the Islamic world and Medieval Europe (*Museos de Andalucía, Conjunto Arqueológico de Medina Azahara, 2025*).

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