

Rosario Arquero Avilés  
Gonzalo Marco Cuenca

## **MEDINA AZAHARA.**

### **Design, Spaces and Rooms.**



The Caliphate city of Medina Azahara, designed to compete with Cordoba itself, featured a terraced design (Manzano Moreno, 2024), with the space distributed across three levels or terraces corresponding to different functions.

The upper level was allocated for the palatial residence, the seat of Caliphate power, with sectors linked to the administration and protocol of the Caliphate State. There was also an intermediate terrace with various official buildings, including the main garden areas; finally, a lower terrace, which constituted the medina proper (Castejón & Martínez de Arizala, 1976; Martínez Enamorado, 2001).

The descriptions of Arab authors indicate that the Medina Azahara complex, including the palace and its surroundings, was luxurious and sumptuous, featuring gardens watered by ponds, walls adorned with rich floral and geometric decorations, and marble paving (Manzano Moreno, 2024). It was configured as a complete urban complex with infrastructures such as bridges, communication routes, hydraulic systems, buildings and decorative elements, in which everyday objects typical of the western Islamic civilisation of al-Andalus at the time of its maximum splendour were used (UNESCO, 2018).

In the centre of the city, dominating all other buildings, stood the palace, the residence of the Caliph, where one of the Umayyad libraries - the palatine library of Medina Azahara - was located. At the foot of the Caliph's palace were all the offices of the bureaucracy of the Caliphate State, whose employees were numerous in relation to the administrative, governmental and diplomatic functions of the Caliphate State, the latter of which supported hundreds of copyists and miniaturists (illuminators of manuscripts).

The mosque of Medina Azahara was located on an intermediate site between the large court buildings and the public access areas, including souks and barracks. It was the first building to be erected in Medina Azahara, and the first preaching took place there in May 941 (Castejón & Martínez de Arizala, 1976).

It was in the central pavilion of the southern terrace, located in the central axis of the great medina, that visitors and guests awaited the Caliph's audience. Beforehand, they would have entered through the so-called *Puerta de las Bóvedas* (Gate of the Vaults), crossing some 200 m of gardens situated along the line of a walled enclosure that led to the Suda Gate, which gave access to the residence of the governor of the city, the first to receive distinguished visitors and to accompany them on their visit.

This southern terrace also housed the *Dar al-Mulk* or Royal House or House of Power, which was so named because it housed royal personages and was also the seat of the council of viziers or ministers (Castejón & Martínez de Arizala, 1976). On the upper roof or *as-Satih al-Mumárrad* was the set of three large *kibli* halls that formed the noble part of the medina where the most important events of the Caliphate's court took place, such as the swearing-in of new sovereigns, the arrival of ambassadors and other events of the Caliphate court of Cordoba.

Special mention should also be made of the room, which, in 1912, was named by its excavator, Ricardo Velázquez Bosco (1923), the Hall of Ambassadors. In the centre of the large upper terrace was the Throne Room - the private room of the Caliph - which was also called the Golden Room, described as a building with eight doors, whose arches were made of ebony and ivory, on the front of which was another small pavilion called "*the qubaila (cupola), which housed a basin filled with mercury, on whose surface the sun's rays were reflected on the upper construction, which seemed to rotate with the reflection*" (Castejón & Martínez de Arizala (1976, p. 38).

At the easternmost end of this great terrace was the *Máyalis al-Xarki* hall, also called *Almunis*, which, according to Castejón & Martínez de Arizala (1976), was the favourite hall of al-Hakam II, who received numerous ambassadors there during his reign and residence in this extraordinary palatine city (Manzano Moreno, 2019).

An account of many of these receptions is given in the *Palatine Annals of the Caliph of Cordoba al-Hakam II*, by Isa Ibn Ahmad Al-Razi, translated by García Gómez (1967).

Additionally, as part of the various spaces and rooms of Medina Azahara, there were also the royal workshops or trade houses (Castejón & Martínez de Arizala, 1976). These included pottery and ceramics, both domestic and everyday, and luxury ceramics, among which the green-manganese from Medina Azahara was particularly noteworthy, as well as the so-called "*tirazes*" or palatine workshops for making embroidery and precious fabrics, generally worked silk intended to adorn the costumes of princes and distinguished persons of al-Andalus (González Arévalo, 2024).

The Caliphate ivory carving workshops also stood out, where pieces such as knobs, jewellery boxes, ointments, and toiletries were usually manufactured. Among these, chests, elephant ivory urns, also known as ebonised boxes, were particularly noteworthy (Martín Benito & Regueras Grande, 2003). These chests featured profuse work on the ivory as a result of “*ataurique*” (a decorative technique characteristic of Caliphate art in Cordoba), based on stylised plant motifs, representations of animals and human scenes, including extensive dedications in *Kufic* inscriptions (Castejón & Martínez de Arizala, 1976). It is in these ivory carving workshops that our main piece was made: the Pyxis of Zamora, also known as the Pyxis of Subh or the Pyxis of al-Hakan II.

### Bibliography.

- Castejón Calderón, R. (1980). Así fue Medina Azahara. En *Nostalgia y presencia de Medina Azahara: selección de Carlos Clementson* (pp. 21-55). Diputación Provincial de Córdoba.
- Castejón y Martínez de Arizala, R. (1976). *La ciudad palatina de Medina Azahara*. Everest.
- García Gómez, E. (1967). *Anales Palatinos de Califa de Córdoba al-Hakam II*, por Isa Ibn Ahmad Al-Razi. Traducción de Emilio García Gómez. Sociedad de Estudios y Publicaciones.
- González Arévalo, R. (2024). Economía y comercio en al-Ándalus: siglo VIII-XV. En *al-Ándalus, esplendor y legado. Muy Historia: edición coleccionista*.
- Manzano Moreno, E. (2019). *La corte del califa. Cuatro años en la Córdoba de los Omeyas*. Crítica.
- Manzano Moreno, E. (2024). Cómo y por qué surgió el califato omeya de Córdoba. En *al-Ándalus, esplendor y legado. Muy Historia: edición coleccionista*.
- Martínez Enamorado, V. (2001). El esplendor de Medina Azahara. [página consultada el 25 de febrero de 2025]. Disponible en: [https://digital.csic.es/bitstream/10261/34393/1/Martinez\\_Enamorado\\_El\\_esplendor.pdf](https://digital.csic.es/bitstream/10261/34393/1/Martinez_Enamorado_El_esplendor.pdf)
- Martínez Martín, A. (2015). El Bote de Zamora. *Revista Atticus*, 29 (junio), 29-33.
- Mosquera, M. y Fernández, D. (2018). *Bote de Zamora. Tesoros singulares*. Museo Arqueológico Nacional.
- Silva Santa-Cruz, N. (2014). Dádivas preciosas en marfil: la política del regalo en la corte omeya andalusí. *Anales de Historia del Arte*, 24, 527-541.
- Torremocha Silva, A. (2023). El bibliotecario de Medina Azahara. *Almuzara*.
- UNESCO (2018). World Heritage Convention: Caliphate City of Medina Azahara [página consultada el 3 de marzo de 2025]. Disponible en: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1560>
- Velázquez Bosco, R. (1923). *Excavaciones en Medina Azahara: memoria sobre lo descubierto en dichas excavaciones redactada por el Delegado-Director de las mismas Exmo. Sr. D. Ricardo Velázquez Bosco*. Imprenta de la Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos.