Palaces figure more prominently in Islamic architectural mythology than other building types because from the Abbasid period onward they contained a half-hidden world of courtly splendor spiced by political intrigue and amorous adventures. Although these palaces, which were never fully disclosed to visitors to the court, were already extravagant in the extreme, they prompted exaggerated descriptions that went beyond historical fact. The Abbasid palaces of Baghdad and Samarra merely partook of a much longer tradition of legendary palaces, from the mythic Persian palace of Shirin built for the most beautiful woman in the world to Solomon's Palace built of colored marbles and rock crystal columns, its roof encrusted with precious gems, its floor paved with turquoise.

2 These establishments also had their stories telling of a fiat foundation, predestined sites, superior materials, and skilled artisans collected from around the world.

The Abbasid model was used to advantage by the Umayyads of Cordoba during the period of eclecticism and artistic experimentation in the ninth and especially the tenth century. In particular, the Abbasid apparatus for enhancing the prestige of a palace through fabulous stories was used by 'Abd al-Rahman III al-Nasir (912-61) for precisely the same purpose. Madinat al-Zahra'—the palace built only a few years after 'Abd al-Rahman assumed the caliphal title of amir al-mu'minin—was supposedly a fiat construction built at the command of the caliph who employed skilled artisans from near and far and imported the best materials from Constantinople, Carthage, the kingdom of the Franks, and various places on the Iberian Peninsula. Although not the first palace-city to be built by a Hispano-Umayyad ruler, Madinat al-Zahra' was the first to be endowed with a detailed building account, enriched by completely fantastic tales of its foundation at the behest of the caliph's lover, al-Zahra' (a character surely invented by later historians). 'Abd al-Rahman and his chroniclers borrowed the Abbasid model of semi-mythical palaces to give the palace an aura of mystery. Like the Abbasid rulers he restricted access so that most of the populace only saw Madinat al-Zahra' from its exterior, or from the low-lying areas within it where service activities and food cultivation were carried out. Aside from family and personal slaves, only the Cordoban aristocracy and select guests were allowed into the elite zone of the palace, and the latter saw only the reception halls and gardens.

Madinat al-Zahra', like the Abbasid palaces of Samarra, had a short life (fig. 1). It was founded in 936 by 'Abd al-Rahman III to provide an appropriate architectural frame for him in his new role as caliph. The palace-city was built well apart from Cordoba in a green landscape irrigated by water from the mountains and planted with gardens and orchards. It was built in a series of stepped levels cut into the southern side of a sloping mountain, the highest level roughly sixty meters above the lowest. The buildings of the upper level were situated to take advantage of the views below: palace gardens with fragrant flowers, water channels, and pools, and beyond and below, the cultivated landscape of the river plain (fig. 2). The prototype of the new grand style when it was built, it became obsolete when the all-powerful hajib al-Mansur (or Almanzor), regent for the child Caliph Hisham, supplanted him in all but name, and built for himself an equally sumptuous, lavishly appointed and gardened palace-city called Madinat al-Zahira on the other side of Cordoba in 978.

On November 4, 1010, a civil war erupted, a result of the struggle for dynastic succession between al-Mansur's grandsons and the legitimate Umayyads. The discord was further fueled by
social and ethnic tension between new Berbers from North Africa and the older, established community of Cordoba. Because Madinat al-Zahra served as the rebels’ headquarters, it was sacked and burned and its inhabitants murdered. Most of the handsome palaces and estates surrounding Cordoba were destroyed at that time as well, and the city collapsed inward upon itself.

After the downfall of the Umayyads, al-Andalus became a self-contained system and remained so throughout the Taifa period. Although the Berber Almoravids of Morocco with their severer taste in the arts were admitted to the peninsula at the end of the eleventh century, al-Andalus was not significantly reopened to outside influences until the twelfth century. Furthermore, the kingdom thereafter did not participate in the making of new decorative and building types, as demonstrated by the fact that the Alhambra, reflecting Nasrid and probably Merinid tastes of the period, was largely a refinement of an already existing concept of the royal palace. And in any case it was not exported to Islamic lands beyond the western Mediterranean but remained a self-contained Iberian and Maghribi phenomenon.

Architectural development was insular, and in like manner the poetic discourse on architecture was introspective and nostalgic. Because al-Andalus was one of the few lands to be lost to non-Muslim conquerors (Sicily being the other notable instance), its palaces acquired legendary status not as the reincarnation of past citadels, but as sites for reflection on bygone glories. No palace provoked the contemplation of the past more than Madinat al-Zahra. In the words of one Andalusian, Madinat al-Zahra after its destruction became a place of wild birds and beasts. Ibn Hayyan lamented that the Umayyad palaces ultimately became quarries for whoever wanted them: “Most of the structures were destroyed . . . the copper was pulled off the doors, the lead of the pipes and other materials taken away. With this ruin, that carpet of the world was folded up and that beauty which had been an earthly paradise was disfigured.”

During the eleventh century, materials from the Umayyad palaces were sold and taken off to Seville, Granada, and Morocco, and by the twelfth Idrisi commented that Madinat al-Zahra was so badly ruined it was on the verge of disappearing altogether. The palace had become, not a site to be preserved, but a place from which precious materials could be extracted for reuse in other palaces.

Madinat al-Zahra continued to serve as a quarry through the remainder of the Islamic period. Then, after the conquest of Cordoba in 1236 by Ferdinand of Castile, the identity of the site was gradually forgotten. In 1408 its grounds were ceded to the monks of San Jerónimo who systematically removed stone and marble to use in the construction of their monastery on the hill above. By the sixteenth century, the Islamic origins of “Córdoba la Vieja,” as it was called, had been forgotten; instead it was believed to be the foundation of the Roman Colonia Patricia established by Marcellus.

Although the Arabic name and identity of the site itself had been lost under the Christians, the memory of Madinat al-Zahra was sustained by the poets and historians of al-Andalus long after the Taifa period. Although the Berber Almoravids of Morocco with their severer taste in the arts were admitted to the peninsula at the end of the eleventh century, al-Andalus was not significantly reopened to outside influences until the twelfth century. Furthermore, the kingdom thereafter did not participate in the making of new decorative and building types, as demonstrated by the fact that the Alhambra, reflecting Nasrid and probably Merinid tastes of the period, was largely a refinement of an already existing concept of the royal palace. And in any case it was not exported to Islamic lands beyond the western Mediterranean but remained a self-contained Iberian and Maghribi phenomenon.

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her of former trysts in the gardens of al-Zahra. Whereas formerly "the landscape was gay-looking and the earth shining with dew," when Ibn Zaydun was spurned by his fickle lover, the dew fell on him like "glittery tears." A less despondent visitor was al-Mu'tamid, the Taifa ruler of Seville in the mid-eleventh century. Mu'tamid and his courtiers made a day trip to the palace while staying in Cordoba, and they gamboled about the fallen stones, hacking away at the brambles, drinking wine and reflecting upon the strange beauty of its ruins:

They climbed to the topmost rooms... until they arrived finally in the garden after having examined the ruins closely, their view increasing in increments as they went. In the garden they settled themselves on springtime carpets striped with white flowers and bordered with streams and water channels... overlooked by the ruins of those halls which, like bereaved mothers, mourn the devastation and the end of the joyful gatherings, now that the lizard plays among the stones and cracks on the walls. Nothing remained except holes and stones: the pavilions had collapsed and youth had become old age, as occasionally iron softens and that which is new rots. All the while they drank cups of wine and wandered about, both enjoying themselves and yet pausing for reflection.

The site was also visited by the Christians, as is clear from a strange request made to al-Mu'tamid by King Alfonso VI. Al-Mu'tamid paid tribute to Alfonso as part of a treaty agreement, but the treaty was ruptured when Alfonso demanded that his pregnant wife be allowed to visit the Great Mosque of Cordoba and to take temporary residence in Madinat al-Zahra where she would benefit from the excellent air. Among the palace's visitors was the Almohad Caliph Ya'qub al-Mansur in 1190. The palace-city was already a veteran of former trysts in the gardens of al-Zahra. He heard a voice that spoke to him:

O Lord of the palace, great and wonderful,  
Listen to my two-word warning!  
You are at the brink of leaving it  
For a pit two palms in breadth.

Historians writing decades and even centuries after the fall of the Umayyads commented, with the perfect vision that hindsight brings, that Cordoba fell because of its rulers' extravagance. This is also, no doubt, why the medieval histories harped upon the subject of Madinat al-Zahra's opulence. 'Abd al-Rahman's excessive use of marble, ebony, gold, and silver in his buildings was a source of amazement and fascination to the chroniclers, but it was also regarded as hubris and a harbinger of the ultimate fate of the Umayyad house. Of the palace's destruction, Ibn Shuhayd wrote:

I am sadly affected by the death which has befallen you.  
But was it not divine justice, since, during your life, you were so endlessly proud of your own splendor?

From the perspective of the following decades, poets and writers lamented the passing of what seemed to have been an age of innocence. Like an elder bemoaning the passing of youth to one who is too innocent to recognize that it will ever fade, they implied that the Umayyads did not fully appreciate the prosperity they had enjoyed. The nostalgia for the lost place and the contemplation of the deserted or ruined palace had been common subjects in Arabic poetry during the early period, a kind of Islamic vanitas theme. Oleg Grabar has pointed out that the theme of "pride goeth before a fall," evoked by the image of a ruined palace, became a common motif in later Islamic painting. However, the wreckage of Cordoba in the civil war was the first direct experience with such ruins in al-Andalus, and it was shocking. The decayed Roman and Visigothic palaces, temples, and churches that the early Muslims had encountered on the Iberian
Peninsula did not provoke such melancholy because the Roman remains were regarded as foundations upon which to build, literally, the new order. They posed no reason for regret or nostalgia for a time when life was simpler and fortunes more secure. The Umayyad ruins, in contrast, were not rebuilt; and instead of presenting an opportunity for creating a new order, they symbolized the passing of a better one. Muhyi al-Din ibn al-'Arabi, visiting Madinat al-Zahra' sometime at the end of the twelfth century, was so moved by the sight of al-Zahra's desolation that he composed the following verses:

Halls alongside of playgrounds gleam, but they have no occupants and they are in ruins.

Birds are lamenting in them from every side, At times they are silent, other times cooing.

I addressed one of the wingborn singers, who was sad at heart and a quiver.

"For what do you lament so plaintively" I asked, And it answered, "For an age that is gone, forever."21

And in a similar mode, the eleventh-century ruler of Cordoba spoke of the empty halls of al-Zahra':

One day I asked the house of those who had passed on, "Where are your inhabitants to us so dear?"

They replied, "They lived here for a short while, Then they went away, but I know not where."22

Ibn Hazm, who was forced to leave Cordoba after the civil war, suffered terribly from homesickness for the city in which he had grown up and where his father had served as vizier. When he asked a traveler for news of Cordoba, especially of his family's houses, he was told that they had so deteriorated as to be unrecognizable. The image of the abandoned halls became for Ibn Hazm a tragic sign for the destruction of the Cordoba he once knew and the passing of a time of peace, security, and happiness. His response was a profound statement of despair:

It was as though the graceful palaces and embellished chambers which were as radiant as the sun, the beauty of their views erasing all cares, now that ruin and utter destruction was all around, were as the gaping mouths of wild predators announcing the annihilation of the world. . . .

I seemed to see before my eyes the destruction of that noble citadel which I had once known as beautiful and prosperous, in the stable, well-ordered atmosphere in which I had grown up; its courtyards once full of people, now empty. . . .23

The uninhabited palace and its neglected gardens are particularly appropriate symbols for the passage of time. In current historical discourse, landscape is a subject for the discussion of space and its allocation among social groups. However, gardens and landscape were profoundly temporal creations, for gardens die and are reborn each season. As the plants within them bud, bloom, and wither, the entire composition of the garden is changed. Thus, the garden is a performance that cannot be fixed in one absolute moment but lasts for a duration of time and must be repeated cyclically to be reexperienced. Also like a performance, the garden's unfolding is recorded in the eyes of the spectator.

In the medieval Islamic world, the agricultural literature revealed the finely tuned awareness of garden temporality, for the works were primarily about time (measured and recorded in calendars) and performance (the act of planting, tending, and reaping). Similarly, the garden was used as a metaphor for the passage of time in Arabic verbal and visual imagery. For example, the sultan of Valencia (probably 'Abd al-Aziz), when washing his whitening beard, equated the withering of a green plant with the wasting of his own body.

Ibn Hazm used images of the deterioration of nature and architecture to express his sadness for the demise of Cordoba's beauty. To emphasize his sorrow, he chose images such as herbs and the youth of a human being in which the passing of time was irreversible. He wrote of his infatuation with a lovely sixteen-year-old girl with whom he was acquainted when his family lived in Cordoba. With the political upheavals that accompanied the fall of the Umayyads, he fled to another city, losing touch with the girl. When he saw her almost ten years later, he scarcely recognized her, so much changed for the worse was she:

... withered was the bloom which the eye once contemplated and had to turn away from in complete dazzlement. Nothing remained of it except a few traces and the experience of the past to tell of what had been. . . . For women are as aromatic herbs which, if not tended, lose their freshness; they are as buildings which, if not well cared for, fall into ruin.25

As Ibn Hazm described his friend's sorry state and his sadness at witnessing it, he may as well have been describing Cordoba itself.
The abrupt decline and abandonment of Cordoba and its palace were constant reminders of how quickly even the most stable of kingdoms can collapse. Madinat al-Zahra, a dynastic monument associated with three Umayyad caliphs, had a meaning markedly different from the Alhambra, which was identified with many rulers. Madinat al-Zahra’s ruin increased the Andalusian sense of the passage of time because it made them tangibly aware of the misfortunes of history: the fallen roofs of al-Zahra and the stripped walls and cracked pavements connoted the loss and ruin of all al-Andalus. No other site in Spain provoked such a romantic, backward-looking response. It gave rise to a nostalgic yearning for an irretrievable time when Islam ruled a unified al-Andalus and its territories were expanding under the capable leadership of ‘Abd al-Rahman and his descendants.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Christian Reconquista was of grave concern. Muslims watched the erosion of the edges of al-Andalus, as piece by piece the country fell into Christian hands and the Muslim rulers were forced into humiliating pacts with their enemies. From 1055 onward, the reconquest became a real threat as Saragossa, Toledo, and Badajoz became Christian tributaries. Nothing was more alarming than Alfonso VI’s capture of Toledo in 1085 because it was the first Islamic kingdom to fall completely into the hands of a Christian king. Equally disturbing was the ease with which it fell. The Christian menace so terrified al-Mu’tamid of Seville, al-Mutawakkil of Badajoz, and ‘AbdAllah of Granada that they sought help from the Almoravids of Morocco who repelled the Christians and then annexed al-Andalus.

The Almoravids were soon replaced by the Almohads, who were eventually defeated by the Christians, so that by the mid-thirteenth century only the Nasrid kingdom of Granada was left. With large portions of the peninsula taken by the Christians, never to be regained, the theme of “paradise lost” reverberated in the Arabic literature of the west. In the battle of Ecija in 1234, the Muslim general al-Kalai led his troops against the Aragonese, crying, “Are you going to flee from Paradise?” And for centuries afterward, Muslim writers would append to the names of Seville, Cordoba, Valencia, etc., the words, “May God restore it to Islam” (a’adaha Allah bi-l-Islam).

The fall of Toledo marked the beginning of the end of self-rule, and verses by Ibn Ghassal convey the sense of urgency felt by Muslims on the city’s loss:

O people of al-Andalus, spur your mounts, for our place here is but a deception.

The fabric of the peninsula is unraveling from the edges, and the cloth even unravels from the center.

We are in the midst of enemies we cannot get rid of. What kind of life is this, living in a basket of vipers?

Likewise, regarding the loss of Valencia after its conquest by El Cid, another poet wrote:

A land whose dwellers were scattered by dire events, Fate’s blows have scattered it by cruel blasts, The hand of Destiny wrote on its courts: You are not you, these dwellings are not yours.

Toledo’s capture marked the first great success of the Reconquista, yet it was to Madinat al-Zahra and the fall of Cordoba in the tenth century that the Andalusians gazed with regret, interpreting its fallen stones as the first signs of the fall of al-Andalus. Thus, in retrospect, the historians and poets perceived that the golden age had already come to an end with the death of Cordoba’s great leaders.

Although the civil war left Madinat al-Zahra in ruins, it was visited regularly to pilfer what fragments of valuable building material remained and to linger among the fallen walls and reflect upon the bygone splendor of the Umayyads. To Cordobans of the years immediately following the war, it was a reminder of the fall of the caliphate; to Andalusians of a later period, it came to represent the political decadence of al-Andalus and the despoilment of its splendid cities by the reconquerors.

Madinat al-Zahra was an oddly chosen image in some ways, for on the strategic playing board of the peninsula, Cordoba was not as politically important a piece as Toledo, Seville, or Granada. But because the Umayyad palace stood as a testament to the disintegration of Hispano-Islamic unity that would ultimately prove the kingdom’s downfall, it became a symbol of the loss of al-Andalus to Christianity. For this reason, its ideological importance was unequaled by any other site. It even surpassed the Great Mosque of Cordoba, because by the time the mosque was converted to a church, Islamic al-Andalus was already
vastly reduced, and many other cities with their mosques, palaces, and beautiful monuments had been ceded to the Reconquista. The Great Mosque was converted to Christian use without causing a stir among the historians and poets. Madinat al-Zahra', in contrast, was the first in a long series of losses. Ruined and never rebuilt, it was a blank page on which to inscribe a variety of meanings. After it became clear that the fortunes of al-Andalus were declining, historians and poets read degeneration into the site, interpreting its ruin as a metaphor for the ruin of al-Andalus.

It is fitting to close with verses by the poet al-Sumaysir who had lived in Cordoba and, like Ibn Hazm, fled elsewhere after the war. He addressed the palace as if it were a lover:

I stopped at al-Zahra' weeping, looking at it  
I lamented its slow decay.

And I said, "al-Zahra', come back." And she responded,  
"Who can return from death?"
I continued to cry, crying in that place.  
But the tears were of no avail; no, none at all.  
Rather, they were the traces of tears shed by those hired to mourn the dead.30

But of course Madinat al-Zahra' did return from death to figure prominently in the architectural memory of the Iberian Peninsula. Its reception halls and gardens provided not only the typological model for subsequent palaces but an ideal of cultural refinement, opulence, and caliphal grandeur which continued long after it had ceased to serve as a visible architectural prototype. Through its destruction, Madinat al-Zahra' was ensured immortality as a symbol of "paradise lost."
Notes


2. "Los palacios míticos de los árabes," in Rubiera, *La arquitectura en la literatura árabe*.


8. One wonders if the columns, wooden panels, and objects thus obtained were especially valued as part of the tangible legacy of the Umayyad palace over and above their worth as material; I have not encountered any statement to that effect in the histories, however.


Fig. 1. Madinat al-Zahra'. Covered passage near the reception hall called the Salon Rico. Stucco fragments on the floor are all that remains of the rich wall decorations.

Fig. 2. Madinat al-Zahra'. View over excavations in garden opposite Salon Rico.