

[Home](#)    [Books reviewed](#)

Anderson, Glaire. The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia (McKenna)

[Back to topics](#)**Anderson, Glaire. The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia (McKenna)**[Reply](#)[Show latest repl](#)

18 Aug 2014 10:45 AM

Message # [3077467](#)[Simon Doubleday](#)  
(Administrator)

**Anderson, Glaire D. *The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia: Architecture and Context in Umayyad Córdoba*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. 258 pp; 16 color and 82 b&w ill. ISBN 978-1-4094-4943-0.**

Reviewed by Caitlin McKenna, Research Associate, Islamic Art, Brooklyn Museum,  
[caitlin.mckenna@brooklynmuseum.org](mailto:caitlin.mckenna@brooklynmuseum.org)

Dr. Glaire Anderson has written the first book-length study of the aristocratic suburban villas of Umayyad Córdoba. Known in Arabic as *munya* (plural *munān* or *munyāt*), these sites comprise a cluster of buildings (including a *hasan*) and extensive gardens (*janān wāsi'a*), according to a well-known definition by the poet Al-Bardī (d. 1076). Modern scholars have understood these estates solely as sites of recreation and pleasure, drawing heavily on later poetic allusions to the *munya*. Anderson, however, contends that the *munya* were also important sites of political power, a layered expression of Umayyad caliphal identity (r. 756-1031 C.E.), playing an integral role in the ruler's patronage, and self-expression. She equally stresses that these Spanish villas should be placed in the broader context of the cross-cultural history of the villa in the Mediterranean.

Anderson expertly draws upon a supporting arsenal of archaeological, artifactual, and textual evidence to make her case. Her introductory chapter summarizes the Umayyads' ancestral connection to the *munya* system and provides a useful overview of the historiography of the villa within the broader context of Islamic architectural history. Jacob Burckhardt's nineteenth-century theory that villa culture vanished with the fall of the Western Roman Empire and reappeared centuries later in Renaissance Italy, for example, leaves little room for the possibility of a continuous tradition of villa culture outside of "Western" architecture as part of a continuous development. Anderson draws upon the work of scholars such as James Ackermann and Oleg Grabar to correct this value-based assumption and place the *munya* in its proper geographical and temporal specificity.

Chapter 2 covers the social landscape in which *munya* patronage occurred. Anderson explores the development of the *munya* system through textual sources, beginning with the story of a *munya* built by the ruler al-Hakam II and renovating an existing estate, perhaps of Late Roman construction, it was named "al-Rummāniyya" after the ruler's grandfather's caliphal residences in Syria near the city of the same name. She also provides a related conversation by focusing on those *munya* patrons from another major court faction, among them high-ranking courtesans who bore princes, upon whom the ruler bestowed titles in his struggle to maintain court loyalty alongside the aspiring free aristocracy. Her concluding chapter provides a further conversation about gender, power, and identity in Umayyad al-Andalus.

The third chapter is the most art-historical in scope. Using archaeological evidence, Anderson identifies a *munya* identified on textual and epigraphic evidence as al-Rummāniyya, the late 10th-century residence of caliph al-Hakam II. She connects the plan of this *munya* to Madīnat al-Zahra, the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate.

suburban caliphal city and to Roman villas on the Iberian Peninsula and in North Africa. Her argument for a broader history of villa culture. However, her sharp analysis of ivory objects scholars than the history of the *munya* produced at Madīnat al-Zahrā's imperial court provides an important lens through which to view the role of the *munya*. Decorated with depictions of sovereigns, and scenes of courtly activities such as hunting and playing music, Anderson identifies ivory boxes, pyxides, and other small containers as representations of *munya* culture. These objects were likely used as portable luxury objects. She shows how *munya* and the portable luxury objects acted as symbols of social status, although the *munya* was visible to broader audiences.

Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate how various aspects of *munya* culture contribute to its symbolic significance well as Umayyad dynastic identity and legitimacy. To diverge from interpretations of the villa as a space for courtly recreation and relaxation, Anderson explains how these estates acted as working estates that supplied on-site lavish banquets and sent surpluses to the surrounding regions. She draws on texts from Umayyad Córdoba and elsewhere in the Islamic world, namely 'Abbasid Biṣr and Andalusi Umayyads. These groups subscribed to broader ideals of courtly refinement through choice of plants and animals for cultivation. Anderson further argues that the *munya* was also a principal element in diplomatic presentations, in which the Umayyad caliphate portrayed its own identity and negotiated power and caliphal legitimacy with their Mediterranean neighbors (the Fatimids and the Ottonians). Within the Iberian Peninsula, her concluding section anticipates how the萌芽 rise of aristocratic urban elites, namely al-Mansur and the 'Amirid regency, which would lead to the fall of the caliphate in 1031 C.E.

One difficulty of Anderson's topic is that no extant villas exist in Córdoba. While she uses archaeological evidence and textual sources to support her sharp argument, she must rely on water systems, architectural ornament excavated along the Guadalquivir River. She does note the uncertainty of identifications of named sites made by earlier scholars. She also notes that many estates existed along the Guadalquivir River but that the absence of information, a comparative approach takes over: caliphal patronage is assumed if there is a program or plan to Madīnat al-Zahrā'. Even though this rationale is extremely common, it broadens rather than collapses the discussion on those involved in caliphal patronage, factors on which arguments hinge.

The contributions of Anderson's book are numerous. She compiles archaeological evidence uncovered from the 1980s through 2009, creating the most comprehensive source of proof for a specific architectural type yet. For the many non-Spanish-speaking specialists of Islamic art, the English translation is also significant. Much of this archaeological evidence has been published in language specialist publications. Her revisionist argument for a broader development can be seen as a cross-culturally-minded trend within the field of art history, particularly among those working on the Mediterranean Sea. The greatest importance of Anderson's volume, however, lies in the generated by her interdisciplinary approach, wherein bringing together medieval Arabic sources related to civic and caliphal life, agricultural production, and architecture alongside Spanish objects produced contemporaneously and spatial interpretation of archaeological remains.

*Note: Chapter numbers are listed differently in the introduction and the Table of Contents. This note way detracts from the reader's comprehension of the text, of course, although this is clearly laid out in the Table of Contents.*