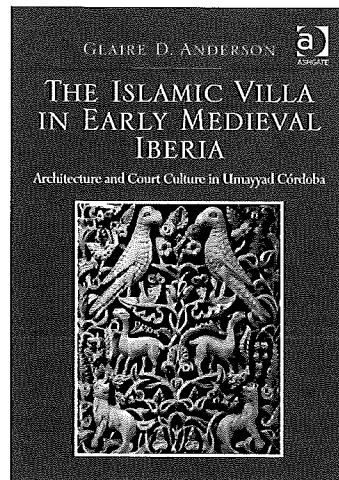


*The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia: Architecture and Court Culture in Umayyad Córdoba.* Glaire D. Anderson. Fanham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. 225 pp, 16 color plates, 80 b&w illus.



The elite of many cultures throughout history have built residences in the vicinity of cities as places of recreation and enjoyment of nature. In ancient Roman times, these were given the name *villa*. And in the centuries since, any similar structure has automatically been referred to as such by specialists and architects, despite the presence of other, more culturally specific terminologies. Such is the case

here, where the name “Islamic villa” is used in place of the more technically correct Arabic term *al-munya*.

Between the eighth and tenth centuries a surprisingly large number of suburban residential compounds of this type appeared on the Iberian peninsula. And the construction of *al-munya* (hereafter, *munya*) was particularly pronounced around the city of Córdoba, capital of the Umayyad emirs and caliphs in al-Andalus. These structures, of which very little remains, provide the subject of this book by Glaire D. Anderson, an associate professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Anderson uses a convergent analysis of architecture, ways of life, politics, agriculture, aesthetic ideas, and other matters to shed light on this little-known chapter in the history of the region.

As Anderson points out early on, not all of these suburban compounds were made from scratch. Some were renovations of existing structures dating to the Roman and late-antique periods. In chronicling these activities, she reports, “. . . Roman and late antique villas and estates which had passed into the control of Visigothic aristocracy may well have survived more or less intact into the Islamic period, thanks to the intermarriage between the newly arrived Umayyad military leaders and the local Visigothic elite” (p.16).

In her introduction, Anderson deals with the phenomenon of the villa, or *munya*, both generally and in terms of its most outstanding architectural details. After tracing this history in other cultures and time periods, she explores the evolution and nature of patronage that allowed this building type to flourish around Córdoba during the first centuries of Iberia’s Islamic occupation. She rightly emphasizes the role of the Umayyad emirs, who undoubtedly were seeking to rival their predecessors from Damascus. But she also calls

attention to a group, the *mawali*, within the court elite whose members were frequently not of Arab-Muslim origin, and who had often risen from being slaves to free people. After they had acquired high positions within the Islamic government, the emirs and caliphs sometimes bestowed *munya* on them (although in many cases the *mawali* were eunuchs, and so had no descendants to pass the properties on to).

The *mawali* were often responsible for palace activities related to artistic production and court etiquette, which made their residences a frame of reference on refinement and distinction for Arab elites. Indeed, the participation of these dignitaries in governmental tasks supported the Andalusian Umayyads when it came to confronting the unsure and unruly Arab-Muslim aristocracy. That same Arab aristocracy, however, eventually took its revenge on the *mawali* following the decline in caliphal authority under Hisham II — which in turn led to the decline of many of these properties.

Anderson next deals with the architecture. Hardly any *munyas* are intact today, and some are completely gone, making detailed analysis difficult. In addition to the lack of physical remains, it means Anderson has had to base her analysis largely on previous archaeological investigations and scattered written evidence. In Spain, a *munya* generally consisted of a main residence, with splendid decoration, accompanied by auxiliary buildings to service it and its attendant agricultural lands. The entire estate was generally surrounded by walls to protect residents and produce.

The best-preserved example of a *munya* today is the al-Rumaniyya. This was excavated at the beginning of the twentieth century, and although its main residential quarters were destroyed shortly thereafter, its surroundings remain intact. Only limited information was published in 1912 by Ricardo Velazquez Bosco, who excavated the main building. However, recent research by a German-Spanish archaeological team yielded information about a hall that probably served as a lookout pavilion (or *mirador* in Spanish). Based on this information, Anderson created computer renderings to help readers imagine the atmosphere of no-longer-existing structures. Although this graphic experiment is interesting and useful, it does not employ present-day capabilities, particularly in terms of light effects.

After reviewing the origin and nature of decorative elements, Anderson then attempts to describe the domestic atmosphere in the al-Andalus palaces. She invites the reader to appreciate the luxury and refinement these offered. This includes descriptions of daily etiquette among the aristocracy and the consumption habits of the court, including the uses of clothing, perfume, food and seasoning. An extensive use of texts, contemporary and from other periods, helps Anderson depict many of these refinements, as well as the life of the servants who made them possible.

Anderson also devotes a chapter to analyzing these estates’ agricultural features. A villa’s surroundings were mainly devoted to farming, which provided a source of in-

come for the owner. But productive lands were coupled with pleasure gardens surrounding the residence. Both relied on the control of water, a scarce resource in a dry climate.

Finally, Anderson describes the role these estates played in the social, cultural and political life of the time. Caliphs often used them as sites for law courts and feasts. The estates also provided meeting places for courtiers and intellectuals, as well as lodging for ambassadors and guests.

*The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia* provides a detailed and pleasant addition to literature on the Iberian peninsula, while expanding villa studies to encompass "non-Western" examples. It will benefit those interested in this type of architecture as well as in the life and material culture of the Muslim elite of al-Andalus. Architects, historians, and art historians, as well as scholars and students of medieval culture, will undoubtedly enjoy Anderson's book.

*Antonio Almagro*

*School of Arabic Studies at the Spanish Agency for Scientific Research*