

Book Review

THE ISLAMIC VILLA IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IBERIA: ARCHITECTURE AND COURT CULTURE IN Umayyad Córdoba. By GLAIRE D. ANDERSON. Pp. xiv and 225, Illus 96. Ashgate, 2013. Price: £65.00. ISBN 978 140944 943 0.

The Islamic villas, which are the subject of this book, were the *munyas*, defined as 'luxurious residences with spacious gardens' (p. 2), which were a dominant feature of the landscape of Islamic Córdoba. This dominance was especially marked in the period of the Caliphate, that is the tenth century AD, but it began much earlier. Glaire Anderson provides a clear, authoritative, and excellently illustrated account of these *munyas*, dealing with their history and the patronage of them, as well as their architecture, decoration, gardens and relation to their landscapes, and their role in the activities of the rulers of Córdoba and their greatest subjects. This is in itself a valuable contribution, especially as she summarizes recent archaeological investigations, most notably those at the *munya* of al-Rummāniyya, and even provides her own, very helpful, isometric reconstructions. But the book is much more than merely an account of *munyas*, for it pursues two major themes in relation to them, which have relevance for European history far beyond the confines of Islamic Córdoba.

The first theme appears already in the title's use of the word 'villa', implying that the Islamic *munya* is another manifestation of the Roman villa, on the one hand, and the Renaissance villa, on the other. So the title articulates the author's argument that there was continuity in villas and the society they fostered after the end of the Roman Empire. At one level, she draws attention to the resemblances between the layout and design of the *munya* of al-Rummāniyya and Roman and Visigothic villas, noting especially the wide central halls with subsidiary rooms beside them; and she presents suggestive evidence that some *munyas* may have been constructed on the basis of their Roman predecessors (pp. 49–50). At another level, she pursues the idea of a villa as 'a conceptual and ideological concept' (p. 7) rather than a mere architectural type. It was, in other words, their social and political functions which defined what villas were, and which made the *munyas* so like Roman and Renaissance villas. It is here that the author's second theme appears: the *munya* was not just the place of pleasure and diversion which poets represented it as, but an important element in the power of the rulers of Córdoba, functioning much as Louis XIV's Versailles was to do in a later period. Anderson shows how important the *munyas* were among the Córdoba elite around the ruler, their creation and ownership reflecting the importance of the different groups within that elite (Chapter 2). She also shows how closely the art of the *munyas* reflected the court-art of Córdoba, so that they were as much a vehicle for the claims to power and legitimacy of the rulers and their elite as were the Great Mosque of Córdoba, or the caliphal city of Madīnat-al-Zahrā'. The gardens, she shows, played a particular role in this, presenting in themselves an ordered landscape and offering framed views of the wider landscape beyond, and conveying the message that the land was fertile, productive, and under the ruler's control (Chapter 4).

Anderson is especially interesting on the functions of *munyas* in the rulers' activities (Chapter 5). She shows their importance for receiving ambassadors, for holding the great feasts which were so important a part of political ritual, for acting as way-stations on the rulers' ceremonial itineraries, and even for serving as places of public executions, witnessed by the ruler and his court. *Munyas* were, she makes clear, a 'primary setting for court activities' (p. 3).

In short, Anderson provides a stimulating discussion of how such villas functioned as centres of power. Together with the question of continuity from the Roman period, it is a discussion which deserves to be pursued widely. Were rural Carolingian palaces such as Ingelheim, and even the estate-centres of the *Capitulare de villis*, with their swans and peacocks, the equivalent of *munyas*? Should we be applying Anderson's arguments to the palace-castles of the French elite as they appear in, for example, the *Très Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry? If Anderson's meticulous work on the Córdoba

munyas were to prompt a radical re-assessment of the continuity of villa-culture from the Roman period to that of Versailles, then that would be a major contribution indeed.

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