

# Radboud Universiteit



## Paradise City

*“Palaces, Gardens and the Caliph”*

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*“Kings who want posterity to talk about their elevated aims  
use the tongue of their buildings  
See how the pyramids still stand,  
whereas so many kings were erased by the ups and downs of time”*

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## Introduction

“See how the pyramids still stand, whereas so many kings were erased by the ups and downs of time”

This one sentence, taken from a poem believed to be written by caliph Abd al-Rahman III (r. 912 – 961) himself, is a simple one, but one that conveys a strong message; the belief that a person’s monuments transcend time and death itself.<sup>12</sup> As both emir and caliph of Córdoba, Abd al-Rahman III ruled over Al-Andalus, present-day Spain and Portugal, for almost fifty years. During his time as ruler, he restored and increased the power of himself and of the Umayyad family, to which he belonged. Out of all the accomplishments that earned him his place in history as “first caliph in the West”, one in particular is central to this study; the city-palace of *Madinat al-Zahrā*.

*Madinat al-Zahrā* was built by order of Abd al-Rahman III to serve as the *de facto* capital of the Caliphate of Córdoba. Construction of the palace-city began in 936/940, depending on the sources, following the self-proclamation of Abd al-Rahman III as caliph in 929. Built close to the former capital city of Córdoba, *Madinat al-Zahrā* functioned as a small independent city. Not only did it contain the royal palace where the caliph and his court would reside, but it also housed administrative and government officials, the royal mint and a small standing army.<sup>3</sup> All of these elements are key for a centralised government to function properly, making *Madinat al-Zahrā* the centre of power within the caliphate.

Unfortunately, unlike the pyramids that Abd al-Rahman praises in his short poem, *Madinat al-Zahrā* suffered a terrible destruction during the *fitnah Al-Andalus*. These civil wars, waged between 1009 and 1031, brought an end to the caliphate and the rule of the Umayyad dynasty in Al-Andalus. Both the caliphate and the palace-city would never recover, and the latter would serve as a reminder of a more prosperous time that belonged to the past. In later times, the ruins of the once great palace evoked feelings of nostalgia to those who paid it a visit. This is a feeling recounted by Ibn Haiyan who personally witnessed the downfall of the caliphate and wrote;

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<sup>1</sup> Dates and years in this research paper are given according to the Gregorian calendar. This is decided in order to avoid misunderstanding and miscalculations when dates and years from the Islamic calendar are transferred.

<sup>2</sup> This part of the poem and the interpretation that it is written by Abd al-Rahman III himself, is taken from: M. Fierro, *Abd al-Rahman III. The First Cordoban Caliph* (Oxford 2005) 105.

<sup>3</sup> D.F. Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain* (Pennsylvania 2003) 53.

*"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."*<sup>4</sup>

Today the ruins of Madinat al-Zahrā outside of Córdoba still stand as a reminder of a time in which the Islamic caliphs ruled the Iberian Peninsula. Ever since archaeological excavations at the site began in 1911, many generations of archaeologists have uncovered large amounts of new information, contributing to the existing knowledge of the architecture of Madinat al-Zahrā and its role within the larger context of the Caliphate of Córdoba.<sup>5</sup> However, only a mere 10 out of a total of 112 hectares has been excavated so far, leaving a lot of information yet to be discovered.<sup>6</sup>

What has been discovered though is a considerable portion of what used to be the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā. These gardens shall be the main focus of this study. More specifically, this study examines the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā in connection to the position of Abd al-Rahman III as first caliph of the Caliphate of Córdoba. In order to fully comprehend Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens within the larger context of the caliphate, this study will provide an answer to the question of how Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens can be understood within the larger context of Abd al-Rahman III's position as first caliph and the establishment of the Caliphate of Córdoba (929 – 1031).

In order to answer to this question, this study will touch upon several debates/ideas within the larger study of the history of Islamic architecture and garden design, and which are key to understand the palace-city and Abd al-Rahman III's rule as caliph. These debates revolve around the following views; architecture as a means of political expression within 'the era of the three caliphates', Madinat al-Zahrā as a symbolic representation of Abd al-Rahman III's claim to the title of caliph, the meaning of the 'Islamic Garden', and the relation between heavenly Paradise and gardens in Islamic culture. These topics are all intertwined and together

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<sup>4</sup> The poem and the interpretation that it is written by Abd al-Rahman III are taken from: M. Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III*, 105.

<sup>5</sup> A.V. Triano, 'Madinat al-Zahra: Historical Reality and Present-day Heritage' in: *Reflections on Qurtuba in the 21st Century* (Madrid 2013) 101-104.

<sup>6</sup> A.V. Triano, 'Madīnat Al-Zahrā: Transformation of a Caliphal City' in: Glaire D. Anderson and Mariam Rosser-Owen eds., *Revisiting Al-Andalus. Perspectives on the Material Culture of Islamic Iberia and Beyond* (Leiden-Boston 2007) 3.

they are the guiding lines of this study. Therefore, before going further it is crucial to briefly address these topics and their relevance within the larger historiography.

The term ‘era of the three caliphs’, signifies the period between 929 and 1031 in which not one, but three separate caliphates co-existed within in the *Dar al-Islam* (Islamic World). The notion of how architecture played a major role within this time period, is central to understanding the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā in relation to the political environment of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The first chapter will elaborate upon this matter, but historians Glaire Anderson and Jennifer Pruitt describe it as a time in which “the Islamic lands witnessed an unprecedented contest for caliphal authority, a contest in which art and architecture played a major role”. In this regard, art and architecture served as a means to express sovereign rule by following models established by the Umayyad caliphs of Syria and the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad during the eighth and ninth centuries.<sup>7</sup> This tradition of undertaking monumental building projects brought forth Madinat al-Zahrā, and it is within the context of the ‘era of the three caliphs’ that the construction and symbolism of the palace-city should be understood.<sup>8 9</sup>

This second view, in which Madinat al-Zahrā is understood as a symbolic representation of Abd al-Rahman III’s claim to the title of caliph is widely shared among scholars and is the core of several studies. One of the most distinguished researchers in this regard is Dede Fairchild Ruggles. As a specialist on Islamic art, architecture and garden typology, she not only highlights Madinat al-Zahrā as a representation of caliphal authority, but argues that it served as a direct challenge towards the Fatimid and Abbasid caliphs who claimed the same authority.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, she stresses the importance of the city-palace’s gardens within this regard, for they “represent a formative moment in garden and architectural history and were the result of the blending of Mediterranean (Roman) and eastern (Persian) traditions”.<sup>11</sup>

This brings us to the third notion; the meaning of the ‘Islamic Garden’. Within historical research, gardens are often connected to the time period, culture and/or region in which they existed.<sup>12</sup> For instance; the Roman Garden, the Renaissance Garden, the Medieval Garden or

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<sup>7</sup> G.D. Anderson and J. Pruitt, ‘The Three Caliphates, a Comparative Approach’ in: Finbarr Barry Flood eds., *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture volume 1* (Hoboken 2017) 223.

<sup>8</sup> G.D. Anderson, *The Islamic Villa in Early Medieval Iberia: Architecture and Court Culture in Umayyad Córdoba* (2013).

<sup>9</sup> Anderson and Pruitt, ‘The Three Caliphates, a Comparative Approach’, 223-249.

<sup>10</sup> Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 53-109.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> G. Campbell, *A Short History of Gardens* (Oxford 2016) 1-6.

the English Garden.<sup>13</sup> The garden, its design, its function, its flora and its multiple characteristics are all connected to the moment and place in time in which they existed.<sup>14</sup> In this regard, the so-called Islamic Garden is somewhat problematic to study.<sup>15</sup> Because Islam, as a faith, is not bound to a well-defined geographical area or clear time period, we are looking at a wide variety of different gardens which existed in different times and different geographical areas, but are all connected through the Islamic faith.

To determine the value of gardens within Islamic culture and religion, scholars often turn to Quranic Paradise.<sup>16</sup> Within Islamic religion, true believers are promised entry into *Jannah*, which directly translates as both Paradise and Garden.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it is a spiritual horizon and a sacred goal to achieve for all Muslims.<sup>18</sup> Within historical research, the Quranic gardens of Paradise are studied in comparison with earthly gardens, as the first being a direct influence on the latter.<sup>19</sup> This connection between the two different gardens is based on the similar characteristics between earthly gardens and descriptive passages in the Quran. Out of the elements as described within the Quran, the most important is the use of the *Chahar Bagh* design. This design, which is often seen as primarily Islamic, refers to a rectangular garden that is cross-axially divided into four separate sections.<sup>20</sup>

In order to incorporate the four views as discussed above and how together they give insight in the meaning of the Gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā in relation to Abd al-Rahman III's position as caliphal during the 'era of the three caliphs', this study is set up in three parts. Firstly, there is an in-depth analysis of the historical context including the most important developments that led to the establishment of the Caliphate of Córdoba and the creation of Madinat al-Zahrā. Furthermore, it will take a closer look at the 'era of the three caliphs' and the tradition of founding of palace-cities. Second, this study zooms in on Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens. Based on both literary and archaeological sources, complemented by relevant historiography,

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<sup>13</sup> In this tradition, the Madinat al-Zahrā is coined as an Islamic Garden, an Andalusian Garden and as a Hispano-Arab Garden. All three terms fit the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā and are an indication of the geographical and cultural climate in which the gardens existed.

<sup>14</sup> D.F. Ruggles, 'Prologue: Paradigm Problems; Islamic Gardens in an Expanding Field' in: M. Gharipour eds., *Gardens of Renaissance Europe and the Islamic Empires. Encounters and Confluences* (Pennsylvania 2017) 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ruggles, 'Prologue: Paradigm Problems', 2.

<sup>16</sup> J. Dickie, 'The Hispano-Arab Garden: Its Philosophy and Function' in: *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 31:2 (1968) 236-239.

<sup>17</sup> S.H. Nasr, *The Study Quran. A New Translation and Commentary* (San Francisco 2015) 142.

<sup>18</sup> I.M. Abueamar, 'Islamic Gardens: The Model of Alhambra Gardens in Granada' in: M. Elgamal eds. *Research Papers of the International Conference 'The Islamic Civilization in Al-Andalus'* (2020) 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ruggles, 'Prologue: Paradigm Problems', 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

it provides an in-depth analysis of how the palace-city itself and its gardens looked like during the reign of Abd al-Rahman III. The third part combines the knowledge of the historical landscape with the analysis of the palace and its gardens and puts forward exactly how Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens can be understood in relation to the representation of caliphal authority. In order to do so, it will come back to the four historical debates as discussed above and incorporate them within the analysis.

The general aim is to provide further insight in the role of Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens within the rule of Abd al-Rahman III, the creation of the Caliphate of Córdoba and the political developments of the Dar al-Islam during the tenth and eleventh century which influenced the construction and use of the city-palace. It therefore connects a small part of one city-palace to the contemporary developments of its historical landscape in order to create a better understanding of how one influenced the other and vice versa. Therefore, this study creates a better understanding of an important historical monument and the time period in which it was constructed.

## Chapter One: Historical Landscape

### Fall and rise of the Umayyad clan

As stated, Abd al-Rahman III belonged to the Umayyad clan, or family. At the time of the prophet Muhammed and the birth of Islam, the Umayyads were part of the Quraysh tribe. It was the same tribe that the prophet Muhammed belonged to. Although the Umayyads were of relative importance during the first years of Islamic expansion, they truly rose to power during the First Fitnah (656 – 661). This civil came forth out of disagreement over caliphal succession. Led by the Umayyad governor of Syria, Muawiya, the side of the Umayyads emerged victorious, resulting in the establishment of the Umayyad dynasty as head of the Caliphate. As the first Umayyad caliph, Muawiya I (661 – 680), managed to reunite a heavily divided Muslim community and to further spread the word of Allah.

It is important to note that the establishment of the Umayyads as head of the caliphate came forth out of struggle and warfare. Muawiya's claim to the title of caliph had to be earned. He directly opposed the ruling caliph, Ali, who was a cousin of the prophet Muhammed. The Umayyad struggle to obtain and maintain power is something that we will see again later on when it comes to Abd al-Rahman III claiming that very same title of caliph. Because it is a position that was earned through bloodshed and violence, it is never certain that one may maintain that position. Even afterwards it had to be earned. Fighting for power and maintaining that position, is a recurring theme in Umayyad history.

During the reign of the Umayyad caliphs the caliphate reached its largest geographical size, expanding its borders all the way to the Iberian Peninsula. In 711, an army composed of Arabs and converted Berbers, led by Tariq Ibn Ziyad, crossed the straits of Gibraltar and conquered the majority of the Iberian Peninsula. These conquests resulted in the destruction of the Visigoth Kingdom and the beginning of Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula. At the time of the conquests of Ibn Ziyad, the Iberian Peninsula was not much more than a remote province within an immense caliphate. However, it would become a safe haven from which the Umayyads would continue to be of importance within the Dar al-Islam and the future home of Abd al-Rahman III.

The rule of the Umayyad dynasty was heavily challenged between 740 and 750. Their authority as rulers diminished, which pressured their claim to the title of caliph. Increasing social and political unrest eventually burst out in a rebellion that would bring about a major

political shift in the Caliphate. This rebellion was led by the Abbasid clan and resulted in several wars which were fought between 747 and 750. It concluded with the deposition of the last Umayyad caliph, Marwan II (r.744 – 750), who fled to Egypt, and the subsequent slaughter of the majority of Umayyad men, women and children by the hands of the Abbasids. After the final defeat and death of Marwan II, the rule of the Umayyad dynasty had come to an end. The Abbasid family seized control of the caliphate, appointing Abbu l'Abbas (r. 750 – 754) as the first caliph of the Abbasid dynasty.

However, one young Umayyad prince named Abd al-Rahman I, managed to escape the massacre. Seeking revenge and a way to restore the power of his family, he wandered around the coast of Northern Africa, searching for political and military support. With the help of those who still owed their allegiance to the Umayyads, Abd al-Rahman I crossed the straits of Gibraltar to Al-Andalus in the year 755. With local support, he managed to conquer the city of Córdoba in spring 756 and was subsequently proclaimed emir, establishing the Emirate of Córdoba. Though officially part of the Abbasid caliphate as an outer province, the emirate proved to rule fairly autonomously. During his reign, Abd al-Rahman I (r. 756 – 788) would expand his power over Al-Andalus and face those who opposed his rule. Abd al-Rahman I's reign was the seed out of which the Caliphate of Córdoba, ruled by his descendant and namesake Abd al-Rahman III, would grow.

### Abd al-Rahman III

The greatest figure in the history of Al-Andalus is without a doubt Abd al-Rahman III. His reign not only transformed an emirate at the outskirts of the Muslim world into a caliphate, but also strengthened the power of the Umayyads in Al-Andalus. Abd al-Rahman III was born in Córdoba as the grandson of the seventh emir of Córdoba, Abd Allah (r. 888 – 912). When his grandfather died, Abd al-Rahman III, only in his early twenties, succeeded him as emir without any opposition. This was the beginning of a reign that lasted for almost fifty years, but although the young emir wasn't directly challenged upon receiving his position, he inherited an Al-Andalus which was heavily troubled. The last generations of rulers had been weak and the *de facto* power of the Umayyads had been decreased.

In the city of Córdoba, within the heart of Al-Andalus, the emir and the Umayyads ruled without much opposition, but the rest of the Iberian Peninsula was a different story. Many cities, such as Zaragoza and Toledo, frequently changed their allegiance and switched many

times between being led by either a Muslim or a Christian authority. The frontier of Al-Andalus in the north adjoined the Christian kingdoms and since there were no set borders, this area had been the scenery for constant warfare and change of allegiance. The coasts of Al-Andalus were terrorized several times during the ninth century by attacks from Northmen. In 844, they sailed up the Guadalquivir river and raided the city of Seville. These attacks show how little the emirs could do to defend their territory from external threats.

One of the greatest challenges to the authority of the Umayyad rulers, during the ninth century, came from within Al-Andalus; the rebellion of Ibn Hafsun (c. 850 – 917). Lasting for three decades, Ibn Hafsun's rebellion challenged the rule of not one but of four Umayyad emirs, proving to be a serious threat to their authority and their grip on Al-Andalus. Though Abd al-Rahman III's grandfather, Abd Allah, already managed to gain military successes at the end of his reign as emir, it was his grandson who finally put down the rebellion of Ibn Hafsun. The basis of Ibn Hafsun's rebellion was the social inequality that the *muwallads* experienced within society. Muwallads were Muslims of local descent or of mixed Arab, Berber and Iberian origin. The opportunities to rise within Andalusian society depended on one's genealogy as well as their connections to the Umayyad family. When you had both, opportunities would present themselves. It was this systematic social equality that Ibn Hafsun, among others, sought to change.

Abd al-Rahman III's conquest in defeating the rebellion of Ibn Hafsun and his sons, as well as his battles against the Christian kingdoms in the north, were more than political. Since Ibn Hafsun's rebellion was supported by many Christian families, or recently converted Christians, Abd al-Rahman III expressed his battles to suppress the rebellion as a holy war. In this holy war, Abd al-Rahman III presented himself as the defender of the true faith. He not only ruled with the grace of God, but also fought against the enemies of God. This way, Abd al-Rahman III elevated his own position within Al-Andalus as a divine ruler who fought not just for himself, the Umayyad family and his subjects, but for the true word of God as well.<sup>21</sup>

In order to regain control over the territories that once owed their allegiance to the rulers of Córdoba, Abd al-Rahman III ordered for the reorganization of the army and the administration of the emirate. The army, which up to that point could be characterized as being nothing more than a "war band living off the proceeds of an annual pillaging expedition than an actual military force", would prove to be necessary in order for Abd al-Rahman III to expand

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<sup>21</sup> J. Safran, 'The Command of the Faithful in al-Andalus: A Study in the Articulation of Caliphal Legitimacy' in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30:2 (1998) 186-190.

his sphere of influence.<sup>22</sup> To change this, Abd al-Rahman III invested heavily in the creation of a standing army loyal to the emir himself by increasing the payment of the soldiers, providing the necessary equipment and enlarging the armies by recruiting new troops.<sup>23</sup> These efforts resulted in a well-trained, well-equipped army which would lay the basis for a united Al-Andalus under the reign of Abd al-Rahman III.

## The Era of the Three Caliphs

As addressed in the introduction, the time period in which Abd al-Rahman III established the Caliphate of Córdoba, was a time of great political changes and rivalry within the Dar al-Islam. For the ninth century not only witnessed the decrease of the de facto power of the Umayyads in Al-Andalus, but of the Abbasids in the east as well. While the Umayyad emirs were slowly losing territory and power in the west, the ruling caliphs of Bagdad saw their authority being challenged as well. War and rebellion in the outer parts of their caliphate weakened the ruling Abbasids and made way for new powers to rise and challenge the caliphs for their authority.

The first major one of these new powers to challenge the authority of the Abbasid caliphs, were the Fatimids. With the decline of Abbasid power, the Fatimids established their own caliphate along the shores of North Africa in 909. Contrary to the ruling Abbasids who were of Sunni Islam, the Fatimids followed the ways of Shi'ism. Therefore, challenging the Abbasids on both political and religious grounds. Both powers based their claim to the title of caliph on their lineage, but where the Abbasid claim was based on their connection to an uncle of Muhammed, the Fatimids claimed to be descendants of Fatimah, the daughter of the prophet.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the Fatimids presented a stronger lineage.

After Abd al-Rahman III proclaimed himself *amir al-mu'minin*, Commander of the Faithful, and thereby claiming the title of caliph, the rivalry between the Fatimids, Abbasids and the Umayyads reached a new height. As stated in the article from Anderson and Pruitt, this rivalry expressed itself through art and architecture, and specifically, through the founding of cities.<sup>25</sup> This tradition of creating cities by rulers, predates the Islamic faith (i.e., Alexander the Great founding Alexandria in Egypt) and therefore is not unique for the rivalry of the three

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<sup>22</sup> H. Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal. A Political History of Al-Andalus* (London-New York 1996) 82-83.

<sup>23</sup> R.M. Gúzman, 'The End of the Revolt of Umar Ibn Hafsun in Al Andalus: The Period of 'Abd al Rahman III (912-28)' in: *Islamic Studies* 34:2 (1995) 155.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson and Pruitt, 'The Three Caliphates, a Comparative Approach', 225.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, 222-224.

caliphs, but it is a crucial aspect of it. The tradition of establishing caliphal cities is vital in understanding the ongoing rivalry.

One of the most important cities in this regard was the Abbasid capital of Baghdad. The second Abbasid caliph, al-Mansur (r. 754 – 775), decided to move the centre of power, which under the rule of the Umayyads had been Damascus in Syria, into an eastern direction. The new capital of the caliphate was the Round City of Baghdad, also called *Madinat al-Salām* (The City of Peace). At the centre of this walled, round city lay the caliphal palace adjoined by a mosque. This area of governmental and religious activity was surrounded by markets, residences, streets and public buildings.<sup>26</sup> The city functioned as the political, cultural and religious core of the new Abbasid Empire.

The second important city founded by the Abbasid caliphs is Samarra. In 836, caliph al-Mutasim (r. 833 – 842) was forced to leave the city of Baghdad and decided to establish a new capital city. Unlike the round and fortified character of Baghdad, Samarra was ‘an immense and sprawling complex of palaces, mosques, barracks, and playgrounds spread along the banks of the Tigris’.<sup>27</sup> Both Samarra and Baghdad, which became capital once again in 892, were the cities to be rivalled with by the Fatimids when they established their own caliphate in 909.

The Fatimid practice of building caliphal cities can be explained through a chronological, eastern movement towards Egypt, which at the height of the Fatimid caliphate was the heart of their empire. The first of these cities was *al-Mahdiyya* and was built and named after the first caliph Ubayyd Allah al-Mahdi (r. 909 – 934). However, as tensions between the Fatimids and the newly established Caliphate of Córdoba grew, al-Mahdiyya was abandoned and a new city was founded. The new capital, *al-Mansuriyya*, was named after the Fatimid caliph al-Mansur (r. 946 – 953), who is not to be mistaken with the Abbasid caliph of the same name mentioned earlier. From this city, the Fatimids managed to conquer Egypt where they would build their most important capital; Cairo.

The conquest of Egypt signalled the beginning of the Fatimid’s peak of power. Their caliphate now covered almost the entire Northern Africa coast. It was not only a victory for the Fatimids, but a victory for Shi’ism as well. Symbolic expression of this religious and political power came in the form of the city of *al-Qahira* (Cairo). Literally translated it meant ‘the Victorious’, referring to the successes of the Fatimid caliphs.<sup>28</sup> The city, with at its centre the royal palace of the caliph, served as capital Fatimid empire until 1171, when Salah al-Din seized

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<sup>26</sup> J. Bloom, S. Blair, *Islam. A Thousand Years of Faith and Power* (New Haven-London 2002) 81-83.

<sup>27</sup> Bloom and Blair, *Islam. A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*, 85.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson and Pruitt, ‘The Three Caliphates, a Comparative Approach’, 228-229.

power in Egypt and abolished the Fatimid Caliphate. However, even after the reign of the Fatimids, al-Qahira continued being a centre of religious and cultural development. Influencing the entire Islamic world.<sup>29</sup>

All together it is clear that the tenth century of the Dar al-Islam was marked by a fierce competition for the title of caliph among the Abbasid, Fatimid and Umayyad rulers. Each of the ruling caliphs believed they were the righteous leader of all Muslims and that their rule was divine. The competition gave rise to ambitious building projects in which no expenses were spared. The result was the foundation of prestigious cities and palaces, all designed to symbolise the strength and power of the ruling caliph. Each of these cities is to be seen as an expression of caliphal rule.

## Conclusion

This chapter outlined the most important historical developments that led to Abd al-Rahman III becoming caliph and the establishment of the Caliphate of Córdoba. It is clear that the caliphate rose out of Abd al-Rahman III's strong political leadership and the military and economic reforms he implemented. The creation of the Caliphate of Córdoba initiated a period of caliphal rivalry between the Fatimid, Abbasid and Umayyad rulers. This rivalry gave rise to Madinat al-Zahrā, which was a symbolic representation of Abd al-Rahman III being the sole *amir al-mu'minin*, Commander of the Faithful, and the rebirth of Umayyad power within the Dar al-Islam.

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<sup>29</sup> Bloom and Blair, *Islam. A Thousand Years of Faith and Power*, 97.

## Chapter Two: The Palace and its Gardens

### Madinat al-Zahrā. City of the Caliph

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Madinat al-Zahrā was built by order of the new caliph, Abd al-Rahman III, to function as the new capital city of the Caliphate of Córdoba. It was a self-sufficient city conceived on a monumental and urban scale with its own mosques, baths, markets, residences and urban administration.<sup>30</sup> During the reigns of Abd al Rahman III and his son and successor Al-Hakam II (r. 961 – 976), it was the seat of power from which the whole of Al-Andalus was governed. The construction of Madinat al-Zahrā partially fits within the Islamic tradition of erecting *munyas* (countryside villas), but because of its complex and diverse functionality, it is more than a mere *munya*.<sup>31 32</sup> It was an entire city built to support the caliph, his court, family and government apparatus. As the centre of governmental power, it symbolised the transition from an emirate to an independent caliphate and therefore represented the height of urban expression in the Umayyad caliphate, in direct competition with its rivals, the Fatimid and Abbasid caliphates.<sup>33</sup>

Madinat al-Zahrā measured approximately 1500 × 745 metres, covering a total area of 112 hectares. For a location, Abd al-Rahman III chose to build his new capital eight kilometres west of the walls of Córdoba, against the slopes of the *Sierra Morena* mountain range (image 1). Situated within the ‘green and well-watered’ landscape of the valley of the *Guadalquivir* river. According to Antonio Vallejo Triano, the site was carefully chosen and designed to exalt the image of the caliphate and to employ a hierarchical scale in which the caliph stood at the top.<sup>34</sup> Built in three broad terraces, Madinat al-Zahrā was designed to take full advantage of its surrounding territory.<sup>35</sup> Not only did it provide an outlook over the wide valley for those within the city, but it was very well visible from Córdoba itself and those who travelled nearby. This ensured that the palace-city would dominate the scenery.

<sup>30</sup> Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 53.

<sup>31</sup> Emerging from the tradition of farming, gardening and bucolic pleasures was the constellation of villas built around Cordoba in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. Such an estate is called a *munya* (pl. *munyas*).

<sup>32</sup> Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic*, 53-109.

<sup>33</sup> Triano, Madinat al-Zahra: ‘Historical Reality and Present-day Heritage’, 90.

<sup>34</sup> A.V. Triano, ‘Madinat al-Zahrā: The Triumph of the Islamic State’ in: Jerrilynn D. Dodds eds., *Al-Andalus. The Art of Islamic Spain* (New York 1992) 27.

<sup>35</sup> Anderson and Pruitt, ‘The Three Caliphates, a Comparative Approach’, 225.



Construction of Madinat al-Zahrā went swiftly due to use of materials from its surrounding environment. Archaeological research has pointed out that the main materials used for its construction came from within a 50-kilometre radius. The direct access to building materials in combination with a large labour force, ensured that the construction of Madinat al-Zahrā proceeded rapidly.<sup>36</sup> Sources mention that already in 945, caliph Abd al-Rahman III and his court were residing within the palace. Two years later, the royal mint was moved from Córdoba to Madinat al-Zahrā.<sup>37</sup> Within ten years of construction, already the most important elements of Abd al-Rahman III's new caliphate were therefore present at the city-palace. Construction of the palace-city continued during the last years of Abd al-Rahman III's reign as well as the reign of his successor Al-Hakam II, who continued expanding his father's lifework.

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<sup>36</sup> Triano, 'Madinat al-Zahra: 'Historical Reality and Present-day Heritage', 92.

<sup>37</sup> Triano, 'Madīnat Al-Zahrā: Transformation of a Caliphal City', 12-13.

## The Gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā

Out of the in total 112 hectares that Madinat al-Zahrā occupied, a mere 10 hectares have been excavated and studied so far.<sup>38</sup> A large part of this excavated and well-studied area are the gardens. According to the writings of historian Al-Nuwayrī; “*one third of the city [was] gardens overlooked by miradors and palaces*”.<sup>39</sup> So far, the excavations at Madinat al-Zahrā have uncovered three separate gardens; the Upper Garden, the Lower Garden and the Prince’s Garden (often referred to as the Small Garden). As the name suggests, the Upper Garden lay on an elevated terrace and therefore stood higher than the Lower Garden. Together they formed the majority of Madinat al-Zahrā’s gardens and are in a sense contrasted to the Prince’s Garden, which was much smaller and more exclusive in both accessibility and design. All three gardens are relevant for their design, function and their relation to the palatial environment and the caliph. Each garden will be analysed according to these three key elements. Image 1 shows the positioning of the three different gardens.

The floor plan, as shown on image 2, clearly shows the cross-axial Chahar Bagh design which, as discussed within the introduction, was a common feature within Islamic and Persian gardens. All three gardens were characterised by presence of water. The paved walkways that cut the Upper and Lower garden into four, were bordered by channels of water. The Prince’s garden was divided into two halves in a similar fashion. Also notable are the large pools at all three gardens, which served more than a mere aesthetic purpose. Together with the rich flora, the presence of water created the idea of a ‘natural environment’.<sup>40</sup>

The first garden to discuss is the Prince’s garden. This garden takes up a special role in the overall composition of Madinat al-Zahrā and the use of the gardens. In contrast to its larger counterparts, the Prince’s garden was small and intimate. It was not freely accessible to anyone who wanted to pay a visit, but only to a small number of people. This select group of people existed of the caliph himself, his successor, high placed court officials and special guests who were invited by the caliph.<sup>41</sup> The exclusive character of the garden corresponded with its design. It was a small, elegant and intimate garden which at both the east and west side was adjoined

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<sup>38</sup> Triano, ‘Madīnat Al-Zahrā: Transformation of a Caliphal City’, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Nuwayrī, *Historia*, 62 taken from: Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 86.

<sup>40</sup> D.F. Ruggles, ‘The Mirador in Abbasid and Hispano-Umayyad Garden Typology’, in: *Muqarnas* Vol. 7 (1990) 73-82.

<sup>41</sup> Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 106.



by halls overlooking the garden. Each of these halls faced the garden through arches supported by columns providing an outlook over the garden. On both other sides the garden was closed off by a wall, guaranteeing a private space.<sup>42</sup>

The closed and private character of the Prince's garden, combined with its limited accessibility, suggests the possible functions of the garden. It might have been a place where the caliph came for peace and quiet to give himself room to think, or as a place where matters of discretion could be discussed. A surrounding of such intimacy could also be used by the caliph to bring women along for pleasure. One account tells of an anonymous slave who refused Abd al-Rahman III in his garden 'the pleasures he so desired'. The caliph, outraged by this refusal, ordered for the mutilation of the slave as punishment for her disobedience.<sup>43</sup> Given its

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 103 – 107.

<sup>43</sup> Fierro, 'Abd al-Rahman III', 82.

closed and discreet character, the garden from this anecdote could very well have been the Prince's Garden.

Where the Prince's Garden was designed to be private and exclusive, quite the opposite can be said about the Upper and Lower Garden. Both were designed to take full advantage of the surrounding area, providing a wide panoramic view of both the garden itself and the landscape of the surrounding Guadalquivir valley and the Sierra Morena mountain range. From the Upper Garden one would look down on the Lower Garden as well, where they would behold the fishponds of Madinat al-Zahrā. These large rectangular pools were used for keeping a large number of fish, which served as source of food for the Caliph and his subjects. According to the writings of Al-Maqqarī, these fish would consume an average of 12.000 loaves of bread each day.<sup>44</sup> Although it is unknown whether these numbers are exaggerated or not, it does provide a glimpse of how enormous the number of fish within the pond and the effort of maintaining them must have been. Given that Al-Maqqarī deemed it necessary to include this information within his writings, indicates the uniqueness of this fishpond.

The third, and possibly the most important, garden was the Upper Garden. Being elevated, the Upper Garden gave a view over the Lower Garden, the natural landscape and a glimpse of the city of Córdoba in the distance as well. As with the other two gardens, the Upper Garden as well was abundant with a varied vegetation and the presence of water. But the true importance of the Upper Garden lay in the presence of so-called *miradors* and its connection to the Salon Rico, also called the Hall of Abd al-Rahman III.

Miradors were elevated sites such as poolside pavilions, portals or towers, designed to provide an overview of the surrounding environment. Moreover, being elevated, they created a hierarchical relationship between those within the mirador and those outside of it, which could be used to create a symbolic hierarchy. The Salon Rico functioned as a mirador and was of great importance. It was the hall in which the caliph, i.e., Abd al-Rahman III, received court officials and foreign dignitaries.<sup>45</sup> The hall was closed off at three out of four sides, with the fourth one providing a view of the Upper Garden, its pool and a pavilion that stood in the middle of the garden (image 3 and 4). This specific pavilion functioned as a mirador as well, creating a connection between the two miradors and the surrounding environment. The Salon Rico was designed to leave an impression on those inside and to provide a glimpse of the natural environment outside as well, creating a close relationship between the hall and its surroundings.

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Maqqarī, *Analectes*, I:346; al-Nuwayarī, *Historia*, I:62 taken from: Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 65.

<sup>45</sup> Triano, 'Madīnat Al-Zahrā: Transformation of a Caliphal City', 22-23.



## All Living Things. Flora of the Madinat

The most visible part of the gardens is also the part most difficult to analyse; the flora and vegetation. Since vegetation such as plants, trees, herbs and flowers are all living things, they are bound to the cycle of the seasons and therefore not everlasting. Stone structures such as the Salon Rico are static and last through winters and storms. Since this is not the case with flora, the vegetation at Madinat al-Zahrā as it was during the rule of Abd al-Rahman III is no more. Already during Abd al-Rahman III's reign, gardens changed in appearance with every passing season. Not one year was it the exact same garden as it was the year before. However, based on literary sources, excavations and similar Andalusian gardens, there is a lot which can be said about the flora of Madinat al-Zahrā.

Archaeological research on the vegetation of the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā is somehow paradoxical. A thorough excavation of the gardens' soil for botanical traces is a delicate and costly procedure and is therefore not often applied in the study of Islamic Gardens. The costs are often too high in comparison to the prospect of the findings.<sup>46</sup> This is unfortunate with the case of Madinat al-Zahrā since its destruction during the civil wars and its subsequent abandonment created the perfect circumstances for soil research. The buildings and the gardens were largely burned and the rubble of the destroyed buildings covered the surrounding soil. In the centuries that followed, no new agricultural activity has been undertaken, leaving the soil to be covered and untouched through time.<sup>47</sup> In short, somewhere beneath the current surface, lies the tenth century soil which might hold new information about the vegetation of Madinat al-Zahrā, waiting to be revealed.

Until further excavations provide more concrete information about the vegetation of the gardens, it remains difficult to say anything for certain. However, what can be done is analyse comparable gardens within Al-Andalus of the tenth and eleventh centuries, to create a plausible image of what might have been growing in the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā. To create this image, the following gardens and their vegetation will be analysed: the Rusāfa palace, the Alhambra palace and the al-Mubarāk palace. These three locations are specifically chosen for their importance on Andalusian garden studies and because of the rich information we have on their gardens.

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<sup>46</sup> D.F. Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes* (Philadelphia 2008) 51.

<sup>47</sup> Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, 52-53.

Firstly, the Rusāfa palace built by emir Abd al-Rahman I. Built almost two centuries before Madinat al-Zahrā, the Rusāfa palace was the first of the Umayyad palaces in Al-Andalus. It was modelled after the Umayyad palaces of Syria and its design and features set the standard for Andalusian palaces estates to come.<sup>48</sup> Although not much is known about its gardens, there is a poem written by a young Abd al-Rahman I that addresses a palm tree within the gardens of his Rusāfa palace:

*“A palm tree stands in the middle of Rusāfa, born in the West, far from the land of palms.*

*I said to it: “How like me you are, far away and in exile, in long separation from family and friends.*

*You have sprung from soil in which you are a stranger; and I, like you, am far from home.*

*May dawn’s clouds water you, streaming from the heavens in a grateful downpour.”<sup>49</sup>*

In this poem, Abd al-Rahman expresses his feelings of homesickness and compares himself to the palm tree, which now stands in a new and unfamiliar land, i.e., Al-Andalus. This sentence suggests that the palm tree was perhaps imported by the Umayyad prince, in order to create a surrounding which felt like his homeland, Syria. Furthermore, the fact that historian and poet Ibn Saïd states that the palace of al-Rusāfa was named and modelled after the Syrian Rusāfa palace strengthens this idea. It is very well possible that a similar way of recreating Syrian landscape and gardens was applied to the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā and that the palm tree had become a common element within Andalusian gardens.

Another example of foreign flora which was imported into Al-Andalus during the reign of Abd al-Rahman I is the pomegranate. Again, it is Ibn Saïd who mentions that Abd al-Rahman’s sister sends him a pomegranate all the way from Syria. The seeds of this pomegranate were then planted in an experimental garden near Malaga until from it sprung a fruit bearing tree. The emir, delighted with this exotic fruit, decided to plant several pomegranate trees in the gardens of his Rusāfa palace and his many other country estates, spreading the fruit throughout Al-Andalus. This anecdote is especially important, because it again highlights the practice of

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<sup>48</sup> Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 42-45.

<sup>49</sup> Poem addressed to Abd al-Rahman I, taken from: Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 42.

importing foreign flora by Abd al-Rahman I. Moreover, not just any foreign flora, but plants and fruits which come from his homeland of Syria.<sup>50</sup>

The second garden to take a look at is that of the Alhambra palace at Granada. According to Ruggles, the gardens at the Alhambra represent the culmination of a long line of gardens and garden estates that begin in Córdoba in the middle of the eighth century with the founding of al-Rusāfa. Both estates are part of the Andalusian tradition of building large country estates and palaces in which gardens played a major role, just as is the case with Madinat al-Zahrā.<sup>51</sup> Continuing to play an important role even after the Reconquista was finished in 1492, the Alhambra palace survived through centuries and still stands as an example of Hispano-Arab architecture and garden design.

The Alhambra palace was the royal palace of the Nasrid dynasty (1230 – 1492), the last of the independent ruling Muslim dynasties of Al-Andalus. It has many parallels with Madinat al-Zahrā; both estates were built on an elevated position, guaranteeing an outlook over the surrounding area and contained large gardens filled with exotic plants and fruits. Also, the presence of large pools, fountains, channels and tanks, emphasized the importance of water at both estates. Therefore, both gardens created a ‘natural’ surrounding that was to be appreciated from within and at the same time was connected to the surrounding environment.<sup>52</sup>

The Alhambra palace contains several gardens of different sizes and different designs. Since the focus of this research is on Madinat al-Zahrā, and given the extent of this study, the only aspect of these gardens to be discussed is the vegetation of the gardens. In this regard, the most relevant garden to be discussed is the so-called ‘Court of Myrtles’, which got its name from the abundant presence of myrtle growing on both sides of a central pool.<sup>53</sup> Given the many similarities between the Alhambra and Madinat al-Zahrā, it is not unthinkable that myrtle was present in a similar fashion at the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā.

The last palace to be discussed is the al-Mubarāk palace at Seville. The palace stood within the walls of Seville, which at the time was the capital of the Taifa Kingdom of Seville, one of the successor states of the Caliphate of Córdoba. Although the original palace and its gardens got lost over time due to countless rebuilding projects, a general idea about the present vegetation can be derived from literary sources and archaeological research. For instance, a

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<sup>50</sup> D. F. Ruggles, ‘The Gardens of the Alhambra and the Concept of Garden in Islamic Spain’ in: Jerrilynn D. Dodds eds., *Al-Andalus. The Art of Islamic Spain* (New York 1992) 164.

<sup>51</sup> Ruggles, ‘The Gardens of the Alhambra and the Concept of Garden in Islamic Spain’, 162-164.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, 168-169.

<sup>53</sup> AlhambraDeGranada.Org, <https://www.alhambraGranada.org/en/info/nasridpalaces/courtofthemyrtilles.asp> (accessed: 29/12/2020).

variety of verses praised the presence of colourful flowers such as roses, narcissus, lilies, anemones, jasmine, stock, violets, poppies and daisies.<sup>54</sup> Another text written by Ibn Sāhid al-Salāt mentions how part of the royal treasury was destined for the planting of ‘olive trees, fig trees, vineyards and fruit trees of all the most delicious and rarest species’. The fruit trees mentioned by Ibn Sāhid could very well have been the orange trees from which pollen analysis has established their presence in the gardens of the al-Mubarāk palace.<sup>55</sup>

In conclusion, though nothing can be said for certain yet about the flora and vegetation at the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā, looking at different examples of comparable estates and their respective garden provides a list of possible plants and trees that might have been present at the city-palace of Abd al-Rahman III. This list includes; palm trees, olive trees, fig trees, fruit trees such as orange trees, vineyards, myrtle and colourful flowers such as roses, narcissus, lilies, anemones, jasmine, stock, violets, poppies and daisies. The presence of all these species would fill the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā with a rich variety of colour and fragrances for beholders to take in.

## Conclusion

Madinat al-Zahrā was the centre of power from which the Caliphate of Córdoba was governed. It expressed both Abd al-Rahman III’s authority as a caliph and the newfound position of Al-Andalus within the Dar al-Islam. To fully symbolise this political transition, every element was thought through. Both the location and its design ensured a close relationship between Madinat al-Zahrā and the surrounding environment and a similar connection between built-environment and nature was expressed through Madinat al-Zahrā’s gardens. As a proportionate part of the entire complex, the gardens held a special position in expressing caliphal authority. No expenses were spared in the creation of a ‘natural’ environment that conveyed the message of power.

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<sup>54</sup> Ruggles, ‘The Gardens of the Alhambra and the Concept of Garden in Islamic Spain’, 167.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*, 166-167.

## Chapter Three: Interpreting Madinat al-Zahrā

### The Shining City

The name, Madinat al-Zahrā, in itself is already symbolic and there are several ways of explaining its meaning in relation to the caliph and the creation of the caliphate. Literally translated, Madinat al-Zahrā, means ‘the shining city’, which already sound poetic, but there is more to it. On the one hand there is the story that Abd al-Rahman III named his new city after his most favourite concubine. The caliph was in love with her and according to the story, she asked him to build her a city, which he then did.<sup>56</sup> Where this story sounds like it was taken from One Thousand and One Nights, the other stories are more symbolic for the ongoing rivalry among the three caliphs.

The second explanation is that Madinat al-Zahrā is a direct reference to Fatimah, the daughter of the prophet Muhammed. Al-Zahrā translates as ‘the Shining One’ and the daughter of Muhammed is known as Fatimah al-Zahrā in Islamic faith. This reference can be seen as a direct challenge to the Fatimid rulers, as they base their authority on their lineage, tracing it back to Fatimah.<sup>57</sup> A deliberate reference to Fatimah by Abd al-Rahman III as a political tactic in undermining the authority of the Fatimid Caliphs would fit within the ‘era of the three caliphs’ and the use of monumental building projects as described by Anderson and Pruitt.

A third interpretation has been put forward by historian Maribel Fierro, who notes a possible relationship with Venus (‘Zuhara’) in opposition to Mars (‘al-Qahir’), which was used by the Fatimids for their new capital in Egypt, Cairo.<sup>58</sup> However, it should not be forgotten that Abd al-Rahman III started construction of his new palace-city almost thirty years before the Fatimids managed to conquer Egypt and subsequently built their city of al-Qahira. Therefore, it is unlikely that Abd al-Rahman III chose to name his city-palace Madinat al-Zahrā as a symbolic reference to Venus and Mars.

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<sup>56</sup> Fierro, *‘Abd al-Rahman III*, 113.

<sup>57</sup> Anderson and Pruitt, ‘The Three Caliphates, a Comparative Approach’, 225.

<sup>58</sup> Triano, ‘Madinat al-Zahra: Historical Reality and Present-day Heritage’, 90.

## The Crowning Glory

Another way of interpreting Madinat al-Zahra and its gardens is to focus more on the internal developments of the Iberian Peninsula and explain the palace-city as the culmination of Abd al-Rahman III's struggles in reuniting a divided region and becoming the sole leader of Al-Andalus who restores the authority of the Umayyad clan. This interpretation focusses less on the rivalry between the three ruling caliphs of the Dar al-Islam, and more on Abd al-Rahman III's journey in transforming Al-Andalus into a fully independent caliphate. However, the conquests of Abd al-Rahman III and his subsequent claim to the title of caliph, directly initiated the rivalry between the three caliphates and are therefore still part of the overall developments of the Dar al-Islam.

After Abd al-Rahman III became emir of Córdoba in 912, he spent a great deal of his time leading military campaigns in the North of Al-Andalus defeating rebelling parties, such as Ibn Hafsūn, and bringing territories which formerly belonged to the emirate back under his influence.<sup>59</sup> As mentioned in chapter one, in order to fight the rebels, the emir invested heavily in the creation of a standing, well-equipped and well-trained army that owed its allegiance to the young emir. The investments made by Abd al-Rahman III proved to be rewarding. The armies of Abd al-Rahman III conquered many regions, increasing the influx of booty and taxations. This process initiated a cycle in which the emir's treasury was filled with spoils from the military campaigns, which were again used in investing in the army. This guaranteed a steady income for the emir and his government, slowly undoing the political and monetary crisis of the last thirty years.<sup>60</sup>

In this regard, Madinat al-Zahrā can be understood as a new chapter in the rule of Abd al-Rahman III. The new caliph spent years consolidating his power and undertaking military campaigns to secure his grip on Al-Andalus. The moment he firmly secured his position as caliph, construction began on the new centre of power of the caliphate; Madinat al-Zahrā. In this regard, the city-palace symbolises this particular transition of power and the unification of Al-Andalus. Creating an immense city-palace on the outsides of Córdoba, would not have been possible without the military campaigns led by Abd al-Rahman III himself and the subsequent influx of wealth. This display of richness and power expressed itself through Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens in which no expenses were spared.

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<sup>59</sup> Fierro, *'Abd al-Rahman III*, 37-51.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibidem*, 59.

## Gardens of Paradise?

As addressed within the introduction, the Islamic Garden, as a concept, is often closely linked to Quranic descriptions of the Heavenly Gardens of Paradise. The close similarities between these descriptions and the design of earthly gardens have led to the idea that garden design within Islamic culture is heavily influenced by the idea of Paradise and that the first is a deliberate reference to the latter.<sup>61</sup> When looking at the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā, the question is in how far this was the case. Were the gardens designed to represent paradise? When comparing the layout and design of Madinat al-Zahrā's gardens there are several elements which would indicate that the Quranic descriptions function as an example to follow. Out of these elements, the most important one is the presence and meaning of the Chahar Bagh design.

As mentioned, the term 'Chahar Bagh' refers to a rectangular garden that is cross-axially intersected into four different sections. The intersections are usually in the form of channels through which water flows.<sup>62</sup> These channels create the idea of flowing rivers within the garden. The Quran describes the heavenly gardens as being two gardens with beyond them two more gardens, indicating the presence of four gardens in total. Furthermore, the Quran mentions the presence of four rivers that flow through the gardens of Paradise.<sup>63</sup> These descriptions create the image of four gardens and four rivers, therefore indicating the presence of the Chahar Bagh design.<sup>64</sup> Exactly this way of thinking has created the popular belief that the presence of the Chahar Bagh design within 'Islamic Gardens' are a direct reference to Paradise.<sup>65</sup>

The plan of Madinat al-Zahrā's gardens (image 1) clearly shows the presence of the Chahar Bagh design in all three identifiable gardens, and as was already stated in the previous chapter, the different sections of the Upper Garden, the Lower Garden and the Prince's Garden were all adjoined by paved walkways which were bordered by channels of water. On a practical level, the use of a cross-axial design provided a sensible way of irrigating the gardens.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, it can be concluded that the Chahar Bagh design is the primary design within the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā. Question remains whether the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā were a symbolic reference to Paradise.

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<sup>61</sup> Ruggles, 'Prologue: Paradigm Problems', 2-4.

<sup>62</sup> Campbell, *A Short History of Gardens*, 23.

<sup>63</sup> Nasr, *The Study Quran*, 47:15.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, 55:46 and 55:62.

<sup>65</sup> Ruggles, 'Prologue: Paradigm Problems', 4.

<sup>66</sup> Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, 43.

If the use of a cross-axial quadripartite design was entirely unique for garden design within Islamic culture and was first established after the birth of Islam, then it would indeed indicate that the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā do represent Paradise. However, the Chahar Bagh design predates Islam. Linda Farrar mentions that the use of the design can be traced all the way back to the ancient Persian palace of Cyrus the Great (r. 559 – 530 B.C.) at Pasargadae.<sup>67</sup> Since then the design has developed itself into a standard way of organizing Persian gardens. To put it in the words of Ruggles; “we should be cautious in assigning an Islamic identity to this garden type because the concept of quadripartite planning preceded Islam; versions of it appeared in both Mediterranean and Persian history”.<sup>68</sup>

But if the Chahar Bagh, though related to Islamic ideas about Paradise, is not a direct recreation of Paradise, then what is the symbolic meaning of the design within Islamic culture and the Dar al-Islam? Again, according to Ruggles, the Chahar Bagh design has predominantly been found within the context of royal palaces. The earliest known palatine garden to have such a cross-axial design was the Rusāfa palace in Syria. The second earliest example of the Chahar Bagh design within royal palaces within the Dar al-Islam, is the Abbasid royal palace in Samara.<sup>69</sup> In Al-Andalus, the first possible use of the Chahar Bagh design was in the gardens of the Rusāfa palace of Abd al-Rahman I. If Ibn Saïd is right and the Rusāfa palace of Córdoba was indeed modelled after the Syrian Rusāfa, its use of a cross-axial garden design would be the direct link in the transmission of the design from Umayyad Syria to Al-Andalus. However, this claim remains to be proven by archaeological research. Until then, the first excavated use of the Chahar Bagh design in Al-Andalus belongs to Madinat al-Zahrā.<sup>70</sup>

Being predominantly connected to royal palaces, the Chahar Bagh is closely related to power and authority. Ruggles states that during the rule of the Umayyads, both Syrian and Andalusian, the Chahar Bagh design was a powerful symbol of territory, possession and sovereign rule. In this regard, the palatine garden symbolised the organisation of the landscape as well as the political economy. Within the garden, the sovereign sat elevated in the middle, overlooking a perfectly organized ‘natural’ surrounding, symbolising the relationship between mankind and nature. Through hard work, mankind cultivated the landscape and organized it. The cultivation of the landscape provided the revenues which were necessary to create such an

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<sup>67</sup> L. Farrar, *Gardens and Gardeners of the Ancient World. History, Myth and Archaeology* (Barnsley 2016) 211-243.

<sup>68</sup> Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, 40.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibidem*, 44-46.

<sup>70</sup> Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 42-45.

abundant palatine complex. The inscription of human activity on the landscape as a whole was a sign of civilization, and within that the palatine pleasure garden was a sign of sovereign territory.<sup>71</sup>

## Power Over Nature

As described above, the use of the Chahar Bagh design as the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā symbolises the idea of man's power over nature and as a sign of sovereign territory. This symbolism emerged from the prominent role of agriculture and agricultural innovation that marked the late eighth and ninth centuries in Al-Andalus. The development of improving techniques in fertilization, cultivation and irrigation had a profound impact on the economy of Al-Andalus. Agricultural production increased in both quantity and quality, resulting in flourishing markets and a steadily growing governmental income through taxation. The increasing prosperity gained through agricultural improvement, gave rise to monumental building projects such as the Rusāfa palace and the Madinat al-Zahrā. The wealth which was generated through the cultivation of land was displayed through the garden.<sup>72</sup> The garden was a natural environment, which was completely designed and controlled by mankind. It displayed both the knowledge and the control humans had on nature.

Although an expression of man's power over nature, there is still a religious connotation to this symbolism. The garden functions as a place where the God-given natural and the ability of mankind to influence the world around them are combined. The garden seems to be a natural environment as created by God, but it is in fact designed and taken care of by humans. Here the line can be drawn between earthly gardens and the Heavenly Gardens of Paradise. For it is God who controls Paradise, same as it is the caliph who controls the land. The caliph, whose power was given by God and rules in the name of God, is at the top of the political hierarchy and controls the land.<sup>73</sup> His power to shape the land and his sovereign authority are expressed through garden design.<sup>74</sup> Since Abd al-Rahman III presented himself as being chosen by God to uphold and defend the one true faith and believed that God himself

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<sup>71</sup> Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes*, 48.

<sup>72</sup> Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscapes and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> A. Petruccioli, 'Rethinking the Islamic Garden' in: *Yale School of the Environment Bulletin Series* Vol. 103 (1998) 102-103.

<sup>74</sup> Ruggles, 'Prologue: Paradigm Problems', 7.

had chosen him to be the one leader of all Muslims. During his reign, Abd al-Rahman III heavily propagated his divine rule and it is very well possible that he aimed to emphasize this through the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā as well.<sup>75</sup>

In this regard, Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens are an expression of Abd al-Rahman III's position as head of the political and social pyramid and how he controls the entire land. At the same time, it represents the prosperity and richness brought by generations of hard work and innovation. It is the combination of this prosperity and the rule of Abd al-Rahman III that has made the construction of Madinat al-Zahrā possible. Built at the foot of the Sierra Morena mountain range, it stood as a symbol of Abd al-Rahman III's God-given power, his ability to control the land and the peace and prosperity that his rule and the rule of his Umayyad ancestors had brought to the people of Al-Andalus.

## Conclusion

This chapter outlined several ways of interpretation regarding Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens. Firstly, Madinat al-Zahrā is a representation of the peace, unity and welfare in Al-Andalus brought by Abd al-Rahman III's reforms and military campaigns. Furthermore, it symbolised the sovereign rule of Abd al-Rahman III and the Umayyads. Secondly, it symbolises the increased social welfare that resulted from revenues achieved through agricultural developments. Thirdly, Madinat al-Zahrā's gardens express the power of the caliph to shape the land. They symbolise how God had bestowed upon Abd al-Rahman III the authority to rule and shape the land He had created. And although it is unlikely that Madinat al-Zahrā's gardens were designed to represent the Heavenly Gardens of Paradise, it is plausible that those who wandered through it did connect them to Paradise. Unfortunately, since the source material on this matter is lacking, this is yet to be proven.

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<sup>75</sup> The limited extent of this study requires us to fully concentrate on Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens. Abd al-Rahman III's articulation of caliphal legitimacy through religious representation is therefore limited within this study. For a complete and very interesting coverage on this subject one should read: Safran, 'The Command of the Faithful in al-Andalus', 183-198.

## Final Conclusion

Compared to its rival Fatimid and Abbasid caliphates, the Caliphate of Córdoba had a short lifespan. A little over a century after Abd al-Rahman III was proclaimed *amir al-mu'minin*, Commander of the Faithful, the caliphate succumbed to the ongoing civil wars that marked the last years of its existence. Fought between 1009 and 1031, these wars over caliphal succession, put an end to a united caliphate and divided it into several kingdoms. The reign of the Umayyad caliphs had come to an end and Al-Andalus would never become the great nation as it was during the days of Abd al-Rahman III and his son Al-Hakam II.

Like the surrounding land, Madinat al-Zahrā suffered heavily from the war. The great palace-city of Abd al-Rahman III, once the stage of ceremonies, parties, receptions and foreign embassies from all over the known world, now stood abandoned and ruined as a reminder of a more prosperous time in which caliphs ruled the whole of Al-Andalus. Madinat al-Zahrā became the scenery for both poets and rulers who paid a visit to its ruins to reminisce about a 'golden age of Al-Andalus'. This feeling of nostalgia has already been addressed in the introduction with the words of Ibn Hayyan, but an even more striking example are the following sentences from Muhiya al-Din ibn al-'Arabi, who visited the site at the end of the twelfth century:

*"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 aquiver.*

*'For what do you lament so plaintively" I asked,  
And it answered, "For an age that is gone, forever."'*<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Poem addressed to Muhiya al-Din ibn al-'Arabi and taken from: D.F. Ruggles, 'Arabic Poetry and Architectural Memory in al-Andalus' in: *Ars Orientalis* Vol. 23 (1993) 174.

The aim of this study was to answer the question of how Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens can be understood within the larger context of Abd al-Rahman III's position as caliph and the establishment of the Caliphate of Córdoba. The analysis of archaeological evidence, literary source material and the extensive corpus of research done by (art)historians and archaeologists, has provided insight in how Madinat al-Zahrā was related to political upheavals of the tenth and eleventh centuries of the Dar al-Islam, in which three political entities claimed the title of caliph. Madinat al-Zahrā's role within these historical developments can be explained as followed.

Both Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens, for these are connected to one another and complement each other, are to be understood as the culmination of Abd al-Rahman III's efforts in becoming caliph and restoring Umayyad power within the Dar al-Islam. Madinat al-Zahrā was therefore more than just a new capital city built by the caliph to house his court and the government administration. It was the expression of Abd al-Rahman III's sovereign authority towards his subjects within Al-Andalus and towards the Fatimid and Abbasid rulers who also claimed the title of *amir al-mu'minin*.

To express his sovereign authority as Commander of the Faithful, Abd al-Rahman III followed a long-standing tradition of rulers undertaking impressive building projects of founding new cities in their name as ruler. This tradition had gained importance during the rule of Abd al-Rahman III's ancestral caliphs in Syria and was followed by both the Abbasid and Fatimid caliphs, becoming a key element in the expression of caliphal authority. With the construction of Madinat al-Zahrā, Abd al-Rahman III followed the example of those that came before him. The gardens played a special role within this regard.

Within historical studies, gardens of the Dar al-Islam are often defined as earthly representations of the Heavenly Gardens of Paradise as described within the Quran. However, as this study has pointed out, this way of interpreting the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā is not correct. Instead, the gardens of Madinat al-Zahrā have a twofold symbolic meaning; on the one hand they are an expression of Abd al-Rahman III's position as head of the political and social pyramid and how he controls and shapes the entire land. On the other hand, the gardens represent the increasing prosperity gained through agricultural improvements which gave rise to monumental building projects such as Madinat al-Zahrā. This prosperity was only possible through strong leadership from Abd al-Rahman III. Although not a replication of the Heavenly Gardens of Paradise, Madinat al-Zahrā and its gardens represented a new kind of paradise; an earthly paradise, ruled by Abd al-Rahman III.

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