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Study of Islamic religious architecture in Spain begins with the great mosque at Córdoba, which has survived in a form scarcely altered until the present day, and is without doubt one of the most important buildings of Islam. Of comparable importance are the minaret and much of the former courtyard of the Almohad mosque at Seville (AME 1, 400-1; Jiménez A & Almagro 1985; Jiménez A, 2002). Among other surviving buildings, all dating from before the mid-thirteenth century, the most significant are the mosques of Cristo de la Luz, Tornerías and San Salvador in Toledo; the minarets of San Juan in Córdoba and San José in Granada, the Almohad mihrabs at San Juan in Almería and Mértola (Portugal), and the minaret at San Juan de los Reyes in Granada (see AME 1, 118; 390-1). Survivals are much rarer after the mid-thirteenth century when much of al-Andalus was Christianized (see Ch 1, p 18). The only mosques from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries that are relatively well preserved are found at the Alhambra, the ermita de San Sebastián (Granada), and the present churches of El Salvador in Granada and Fiñana (Almería).

However, medieval archaeology has revolutionised the understanding of Islamic religious buildings through the discovery and exposure of a significant number of new examples. We can pick out the mosque at Madinat al-Zahrá, excavated by Félix Hernández and Basilio Pavón from 1964 (Pavón 1966); that of Vascos (Toledo), found close to the alcazaba (castle) between the year 1996 and 1997; and remains unearthed at three sites in Murcia, in the former Alcázar of the city, in the suburb of the Arrixaca close to San Esteban’s church, and the three arches of a possible mosque that appeared at the monastery Nuestra Señora de las Huertas (Lorca).

Among the most spectacular discoveries of the last 25 years are two examples of the rábita, an Islamic analogy to the monastery, composed of a large number of small oratories provided with their corresponding mihrabs (the focal apsidal alcove). One rábita (ribáat) was found at Guardamar (Alicante), near the mouth of the River Segura and belonged to the tenth or eleventh centuries (Azuar 2004), and the other on a peninsula called Ponta da Atalaia, six kilometres from Aljezur to the north of Cape Saint Vincent in Portugal (Varela Gomes 2007). Another surprising recent discovery was the mosque at the so-called Cortijo de las Mezquitas in the countryside at Antequera (Malaga) (Gozalbes 2006). Most of it was camouflaged in the standing fabric of a farmhouse that had been in use up to a few years ago. Its prayer-hall extended to 338 sq m and the total extent of the building, including the courtyard is 450 sq m. Most rural mosques are much smaller than this. While much of this work awaits detailed publication, interim assessments maybe found in general reviews by Calvo Capilla (2001, 2004, 2007) and Pavón Maldonado (2009).
Mosques: form and typology

The principal religious building of Islam was the mosque (sp. mezquita), with its defining attributes the courtyard, prayer-hall, mimbar (pulpit) and mihrab (niche), situated in the qibla (the long wall of the prayer hall) (Fig 11.25). The orientation of the qibla determined the direction in which worshippers faced, which was in principle towards Mecca. The orientation of the qibla in distant al-Andalus has naturally been a matter of some debate. We know that the qibla at Madinat al-Zahra’ which is oriented at 109 degrees, was aligned by means of astronomical calculations, and lies within 9 degrees of the true direction of Mecca. However, that at Córdoba is oriented at 152 degrees. Rius (1999) has distinguished five principal orientations and assigned them to distinct schools or doctrinal groups. One of these was favoured by the Malikis, the Quaranic school that held majority sway in al-Andalus, and it used the direction of sunrise at the winter solstice (at 120 degrees).

The plan of most mosques followed that of Córdoba, which in turn followed that of the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, in that the aisles were perpendicular to the qibla, rather than parallel as at Damascus. Recent study by Calvo (2001) has distinguished three types of mosque plan: (1) longer than they are wide, with 3-5 aisles perpendicular to the qibla; (2) wider than they are long, with 3-5 aisles perpendicular to the qibla; and (3) prayer halls with one or two aisles parallel to the qibla.

Type 1 appears to have been inspired by the phase 2 or 3 mosque at Córdoba, corresponding to the reign of Muhammad I (up to 886) and ‘Abd al-Rahmân III (up to 961). Into this category fall the mosques at Madinat al-Zahra’, Almonaster, Niebla, Cuatrovitas, La Xara and Cortijo del Centeno. Type 2 appears to emulate the first prayer hall at Córdoba (belonging to the end of the eighth century). To this type belong the relatively well-conserved examples from Vascos (tenth or eleventh centuries) and Archidona (tenth century).

![Schematic plan of a mosque showing principal components (M Carver).](image)
Type 3 mosques, with one or two aisles parallel to the qibla is apparently the least sophisticated. The nearest parallels are to be found among the traditional layouts used as prayer halls by nomadic populations of North Africa and the Near East. Examples from al-Andalus are rural mosques from Guardamar (ninth-tenth centuries), the suburb of Vascos (tenth or eleventh centuries) and Marcén (eleventh century), all relatively modest in appearance and small in size (and see Box 11.5 below for an example from Sicily).

The mosque in the town

The mosque was intended as a ritual building in which to pray, and its design derives from the time of the Prophet. Arab medieval sources distinguish the ordinary mosque from the ‘Friday mosque’ (masjid al-jāmi‘), where the citizens were obliged to go on Fridays to hear the sermon (khutāba) delivered from the pulpit (minbar). The sermon performed a political as well as a spiritual purpose, since it served to transmit the Caliph’s policies to the people and command their allegiance. For this reason, in the first centuries of Islam there could only be one Friday mosque with a mimbar in each city. The mosque also functioned as a palace of justice and place of religious instruction until the appearance of the madrasa (religious school) in the eleventh century. The mosque also housed the treasury of religious assets (waqf). The obligation to attend the Friday service brought a large population into the town with important consequences for urban planning and development (see Ch 9, p 407).

In addition to the jami’, every Andalusian city had a number of neighbourhood prayer-halls. After the Christian reconquest, some of these were recommissioned as parish churches, while others were adapted to various uses by the incoming Christian population. Most of the Jamis themselves were transformed into collegiate and major churches, including the magnificent cathedrals whose Gothic fabric sometimes rose upon Islamic foundations, as happened, for example, with the Seville mosque. Famously spared from refurbishment was of course the mosque at Córdoba, which is likely to have been appreciated for its architectural values, since its vaults, arcades and façades were imitated or reproduced in churches and monasteries through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

Rural mosques

The importance of praying together meant that some mosques were constructed to serve small agricultural populations living at a distance from the town. The best known examples in which some architectural elements are conserved are those at Cuatrovitas (Sevilla) and “La Xara”, in Simat de Valldigna (Valencia). Numerous textual references make it clear that in some cases such establishments might also be designated to take Friday prayers and exercise the functions of a jami’. From a thirteenth-century document we know of three small villages on the outskirts of Murcia (Benibarrira, Tel Alquibir and Benieça) of the same size and similar wealth; but only one was designated as a Friday mosque and provided with a mimbar (Torres Fontes 1971, 83). Similarly three small settlements in Almisserà (Villajoyosa, Alicante), which were occupied between the eleventh
and the mid thirteenth century, set up a mosque with a cemetery midway between the three (García J R et al 2004). Sometimes, but not always, the location of the communal mosque coincided with that of the communal fortress (hisn), where a dispersed population could congregate and take refuge in times of trouble (Angelé and Cressier 1990).

Excavations at Centeno, Lorca (Murcia) revealed a small quadrilateral rural mosque with three aisles (the centre wider than the other two) perpendicular to the qibla wall (Fig 11.26). The internal dimensions of the prayer hall were only 9.8 x 9.30m, amounting to 91.14 sq m. A series of buttresses was added to strengthen the walls, and a square foundation for a minaret was placed at the north-west corner. An extra room of a few metres in depth had been added to the qibla wall with a door opening on to the street. On the floor of the prayer hall were imprints of a structure in a place suggestive of the mimbar from which the Friday sermon would be delivered. The mihrab niche was incorporated in the thickness of the qibla wall but projected to the exterior with a pentagonal plan, while the interior was semicircular. To its right was a second niche of rectangular plan measuring 1.24 x 0.66m, with a similar projection into the exterior. The positioning of this niche, together with tracks left on the floor by wheeled furniture, implied the position of the now-vanished mimbar – the first archaeological evidence for such a key liturgical fitting from a rural site.

It seems likely that this was the Friday mosque serving the nearby fortress of Puentes and no doubt a group of other small settlements in the neighbourhood. Although difficult to date, the mosque is likely to have been abandoned by the conquest of Lorca in 1244 (Navarro & Jiménez 2002).

![Archaeological plan of the excavated rural mosque at Cortijo del Centeno (Lorca, 12-13th century), showing the mihrab, mimbar, minaret and entrances. The extension to the south-east was probably intended as a room where the dead rested before burial (masyid al-yana'īz). The semicircular buttress on the exterior wall signals the location of the qibla wall, now enclosed.](image-url)