

# City and Belief: Córdoba Before the Reconquest

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Religious belief systems, have provided architecture in the West with virtually inexhaustible sources of inspiration for the generation of building programs, forms and ornamentation. Typically, however, the relationship between religious belief and design ends at the scale of buildings or building complexes. Though city founding rituals are common to many cultures, religion and built form seem, ultimately, to have little to do with each other at an urban scale.<sup>1</sup> It is true that religious structures often form powerful centers in urban environments; however where the dominance of a single ideology is not at question other factors, such as geography, defense or economy, contribute more significantly to urban growth patterns.<sup>2</sup> In cases where a single religious ideology does not hold permanent sway, however, religious beliefs can more strongly affect urban form. Competitive pressures among various religious groups encourage broader expressions of religious ideology. Córdoba, Spain, which felt the assertions of at least four major religions, three of them simultaneously, from its founding until its final conquest by Christians in 1263, provides a remarkable example of this situation.

Religion formed Córdoba. Successive states of the city resulted in large part from the interaction of citizens who espoused divergent religious beliefs. As new patterns of aggression, repression and tolerance between groups arose, the city assumed substantially different forms. At times Córdoba changed incrementally according to the lifestyle of a given dominant group: Carthaginians founded Córdoba under the auspices of Baal Hammon.<sup>3</sup> Romans conquered and re-founded it following ancient Etruscan rituals. Agrarian Christian Visigoths overtook the city, but allowed it to crumble. Moorish conquerors re-established Córdoba but cohabited it with Jews and Christians until Christians finally established dominance in 1263. Particularly during the centuries of relatively peaceful cohabitation of religious groups in Córdoba before 1236, the city slowly and subtly took shape, adjusting to degrees of tolerance and persecution of one group by another. As one belief system gradually molded another in a quiet struggle for dominance, Córdoba registered the changes.

The origins of Córdoba are obscure as are most vestiges of its reincarnation as a Roman town. It is likely that the town was first established by Carthaginians as silver and tin mining outpost sometime in the early first millennium bc. However, the city was no doubt founded according to prescribed religious formulas. These seem to have included the ritual sacrifice of infant children to the chief Carthaginian deity and protector of the community, Baal Hammon.<sup>4</sup>

The Romans occupied Córdoba in 152 bc. We can speculate that this involved far more than simply re-settling the town. More likely, it involved a destruction similar to that which the Romans performed when they conquered Carthage. "After the town had been taken and destroyed, its site had to be ploughed, or rather 'unploughed.' Perhaps the plough had been drawn anti-clockwise round the city site."<sup>5</sup>

This rather strange act of 'unploughing,' as Joseph Rykwert refers to it, commemorates, but negates the traditional foundation ritual which preceded the settlement of Rome and Roman towns. This ritual, to which the now cleansed site of Córdoba also would have been subjected, involved first the sanctification of the city center and the inscription of the principle axes connecting to the heavens and to points beyond the horizon. The city boundary was then solemnly marked with a bronze plow pulled clockwise around the site by a white cow and a white ox.<sup>6</sup> The Roman town, at least at the moment of its founding, was fundamentally a religious entity physically planted in the ground but symbolically joined to the heavens and to Rome.

Córdoba remained the center of Roman administration on the Iberian Peninsula after the spread of Christianity in the 1st century AD until the Visigoths conquered the peninsula five centuries later.<sup>7</sup> It is not clear what affect the advent of Christianity would have had on the form of Córdoba, aside from the construction of churches. However conflict between Christians and Jews early in the 4th century precipitated repressive policies that certainly affected the natural expression of coexisting populations in the city. Following Council of Elvira, which took place near Granada from 303 to 306, Christians set the groundwork for decrees which "interdicted the building of new synagogues or the repair and embellish-

ment of existing ones” within areas controlled by Christian Rome.<sup>8</sup> This policy presaged similar interdictions that Muslims enforced against Christians in Córdoba half a millennium later.

After conquering Roman outposts on the Iberian Peninsula, the Visigoths finally consolidated power in the middle of the 6th century and established their capital in Toledo. Because the Visigoths were an agrarian culture, they did not tend to maintain large urban populations. Nor did they sustain extensive trade networks and did not generally construct or maintain land routes for communication and transportation. Cities on the Iberian Peninsula, including Córdoba, thus lapsed into relative obscurity. The great bridge that crosses the Guadalquivir River is the only remaining evidence of Córdoba’s stature as a great Roman capital.<sup>9</sup>

During the centuries of their rule, the Visigoths never established a strongly defensible position on the Iberian Peninsula. This resulted in part from the paucity of communication links and the dispersion of the population. However, more than any other factor, continual conflicts between competing Christian sects represented by Visigoths and their Hispano-Roman subjects left Christians unorganized and unable to defend themselves against the Muslim invasion in 711.<sup>10</sup> The Muslims, with the assistance of the resident Sephardic Jews, conquered the Visigoths and occupied Toledo and the land surrounding Córdoba in less than three years.

As I have already indicated, Sephardic Jews suffered ill treatment under the Christian emperors of Rome but, because of their skill as merchants, they had remained an essential part of the Roman economy under the Christian emperors. Deprived of their mercantile role in the agrarian economy of the Visigoths, Sephardic Jews had become virtual outcasts as well as occasional targets for open hostilities on the part of Christians.<sup>11</sup> After the Muslim invasion of 711, their lot improved tremendously.<sup>12</sup>

With the arrival of yet another religion, Islam, on the Iberian Peninsula an extremely complex and rich system of tolerance, repression, cultural maturation, subversion and destruction arose. The center of this system was Córdoba, the seat of the Muslim power from 719 until it was reconquered by Christians in 1236. The cohabitation of three distinct religious groups in Córdoba gradually lent to the city a hybrid aspect that reflected the subtle workings of religious tolerance and repression on the urban fabric.

By 711 the Córdoba of Roman times had disappeared; its buildings had long since crumbled and its foundations were wholly buried. This left only the ancient abandoned site, dominated by the Roman bridge, on the right bank of the Guadalquivir. In 719 Muslims again established Córdoba as a regional center in an expanding cosmopolitan empire. Al-Andalus, as Islamic territory Spain was called, maintained regular and substantial trade links within Damascus, the center of the Islamic empire, and with other cities throughout the Mediterranean basin. It became an independent nation in 929, when Abdu’r-Rahman III named himself Caliph and

ruler of Islamic territory on the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>13</sup>

The cosmopolitan nature of Islamic Córdoba concentrated not only Muslim administrators, but local Christian and Jewish religious leaders, merchants and artisans. As in all urban situations, this led to trade specialization and an economy based on the acquisition of goods and money rather than property. Interdependence between Muslims and their subjects thus became an economic necessity. However these relationships were never entirely comfortable, and the consequences of this became evident almost immediately in the form that the city began to take.

Naturally, after 719, Córdoba assumed distinctively Islamic spatial characteristics, sometimes by design, but often as an incidental consequence of Islamic modes of life. Medieval Islamic towns were notable for their apparent lack of planning, though the placement of certain structures was at least partially intentional. As Glick indicates, the “chief morphological characteristics [of Medieval Islamic cities] were the centrality of the mosque and markets, the eccentric location of fortress or citadel on a high spot along the town wall, the rigid distinction between public and private space, the fragmentation of quarter, and the difficulty of access to residential streets.”<sup>14</sup> In most of these aspects Córdoba’s plan was exemplary.

Consistent with the rather loose organization of Islamic cities, even the fixtures of Córdoba’s mosque and citadel were subject to specific local conditions. Thus economic pressures pushed Córdoba’s great mosque and its associated market areas toward the Guadalquivir, the city’s most important trade route. Even though it still clearly occupied a position of central, cultural importance to the city, the mosque had been nudged by practical considerations. The citadel, in turn, maintained an eccentric position relative to the mosque and the center of commercial activity.

In Córdoba the distinction between public and private space arose not by design, as would have been the case in the Roman city, but from religious and cultural notions of private life—from attempts, for example, to limit the movement of women, to maintain family cohesiveness and to preserve religious purity.<sup>15</sup> Physical expressions of Muslim public life, for example, contrasted strongly with those that housed the activities of Christians. In his description of Muslim and Christian cemeteries, Glick provides a striking demonstration of this. He explains that much of Muslim public life occurred outside of the city walls in “extensive cemeteries (thirteen in Córdoba), and open-air prayer and parade grounds... The cemeteries ... served a variety of non-religious functions: lovers trysted there and tanners dried their hides on graves. All this was in strict contrast to Christian Spain, where cemeteries were parochial and included within the town walls.”<sup>16</sup>

In its flexible adherence to a prescribed plan, altered according to specific local conditions, Córdoba took a vastly different shape under Islamic dominion than could have under Roman rule. Roman Córdoba had been founded according to strict rules which dictated its eventual form.<sup>17</sup> The

position and width of roads and city gates in Roman towns were preordained, consequently institutions and town quarters assumed predictable shapes and positions within the city. In Islamic Córdoba, by contrast, the nature and position of town's institutions and residential quarters were heavily conditioned by geographical, political and religious characteristics of the area.

Religious segregation played a particularly significant part in the quartering of Córdoba. Jews were traditionally merchants, and, as such, they would naturally have maintained their own quarter in Córdoba, as did other trade groups. But it becomes clear that this was not the basis for the aggregation of the Jewish population in Córdoba. First of all, not all of the occupants of the *judería* were merchants, and unlike the quarters of other tradespeople, it was encircled a gated wall. Evidently this arrangement protected Jews from aggression on the part of Christians,<sup>18</sup> who harbored lingering resentment for Jewish involvement in the Muslim conquest. Though Jews and Christians had lived together on the Iberian Peninsula for centuries, the Jews, as Christian subjects, had always suffered some form of oppression that varied from begrudging tolerance to mild persecution. The Muslims treated the Jews with far greater deference than had Hispano-Roman and Visigothic Christians: nevertheless, the segregation of Jews into an enclosed quarter in Islamic Córdoba almost certainly reflected prejudice as well paternalism on the part of the Muslims.

The Jews of al-Andalus governed themselves under Jewish law and practiced their religion unhindered. They maintained a strong intellectual tradition and played a significant part in the life Muslim cities, particularly in Córdoba where, according to Halperin, "Jews became knights, physicians, scholars and poets. There was even a Jewish prime minister when Córdoba was the largest city in the world. ... The years following 711 are known as the Golden Age of Judaism."<sup>19</sup> These freedoms were abruptly curtailed in the eleventh century, at a time when the caliphate was declining in the hands of Islamic fundamentalists and had already suffered from strong resistance by Christian subjects and a steadily advancing Christian kingdom to the north. At that time the Jews in al-Andalus suffered active persecution, and many of their synagogues were burned.<sup>20</sup>

Christians too were allowed to practice their religion under Muslim rule, but they were even more fully assimilated into, or rather subsumed by, Muslim communities than were Jews. By the time of the Reconquest, a long-standing Muslim policy of at least tacit tolerance had led to the development of a Christian culture in al-Andalus (Mozarabism) that, in many respects, was more clearly distinct from that of Christians in the North (who had always been free of Muslim dominance) than from the culture of the Muslims.

Despite some religious segregation, restriction, censure and even occasional persecution by Islamic fundamentalists late in the life of the caliphate, forced conversion was never enacted in al-Andalus because The Koran discouraged it. Since Mohammed saw himself as a successor of the prophets

of Israel and of Christ, and thus an heir of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, Muslims were required to respect Christians and Jews as "people of the book", a requirement which they generally observed, though to varying degrees.<sup>21</sup>

From the very beginnings of Islamic Spain, Christians were treated with surprising deference by their conquerors. When Muslims conquered the Visigoths in 713, the Visigoths "agreed... to accept the protection of Allah and the prophet Muhammad in return for the promise that his subjects would not be killed or their goods appropriated, and that their religion would not be harmed and their churches and cult objects not burned."<sup>22</sup> Christians were always encouraged to convert to Islam; however, they were also permitted to pursue their religion in relative freedom. However, under Islamic rule, Christians and Jews were forced to accept certain legal limitations:

First, by accepting status as [protected peoples], members of religious minorities were effectively excluded from participation in political power. Although, under special and always temporary conditions, Christians and Jews did attain considerable political power, the only way to achieve substantial upward mobility in the society at large was to convert to Islam. Second, the system had built-in inducements to assimilation in the form of tax incentives (exemption from the *jizya* or poll tax) for those who converted. Third, the formal recognition of religious differences meant that Islamic society sanctioned among religious minorities a relatively high degree of cultural enclosure. That is, by granting the persistence of the primary factor that made peoples distinct from one another — religion — Islamic society put less pressure on religious values that it placed upon non-Arab Muslims."<sup>23</sup>

For Jews, these limitations led to physical enclosure; however, for Christians their ramifications were more complex, because they lived *among* Muslims. Unlike the Jews, Christians in al-Andalus maintained little or no physical separation from Muslims, and the two groups apparently lived harmoniously in Córdoba until at least the middle of the ninth century.

In most matters, Christians ruled themselves according to their own code of law. Where Muslims and Christians interacted, however, Islamic law held sway. This gave Christians autonomy as long as they did not actively intrude on the lives of Muslims or threaten their political and social dominance. Ultimately this policy enforced religious distinctions which were intended to help maintain the purity and strength of Islam in al-Andalus.<sup>24</sup> To avoid apparent domination by Christians in any form, public displays of Christian strength were strongly censured. Evidently, even minor demonstrations posed a threat, as Christians were "prohibited from public processions with crosses, palms, images or candles in Muslim neighborhoods."<sup>25</sup> Other restrictions attempted to diminish subtly the visual presence of Christians within the community. Christians were not permitted to wear Muslim

dress, which made their status as non-Muslims publicly visible. The building of new churches was forbidden, and Christians were not permitted to paint or otherwise improve existing ones. These restrictions were enforced with varying levels of intensity until the beginning of the tenth century, when caliph Muhammad I “gave the order to destroy all recently constructed churches and to destroy all new ornaments.”<sup>26</sup> In contravention of agreements established soon after the Muslim conquest, Muhammad I also destroyed church towers throughout the city. By destroying church towers, Muslims assured that Christian edifices could no longer compete visually with the minarets of Córdoba’s mosques. After centuries of conditional tolerance visual expression of Christianity in Córdoba was gradually subsumed in a largely Islamic structure of the city.

Jewish and Christian status as protected peoples under Islamic law had a dual effect on the structure of Córdoba. On one hand a tendency toward religious segregation led to the establishment of distinct physical enclaves for Jews. On the other hand, gradual subversion of both Christian and Jewish culture, as well as restrictions to and the eventual destruction of religious structures led to a broad homogenization of building techniques among the cultures. Islamic buildings, like the great mosque in Córdoba and the minarets of other mosques eventually came to dominate the city. Because Christians were not physically segregated from Muslims in Córdoba and because of legal restrictions on Christian structures, any unique architectural contribution that they might have made to the city of Córdoba was intentionally obscured.<sup>27</sup>

The Islamic underpinnings of Córdoba surface most strikingly in the arrangement of its streets. As in many Islamic cities, Córdoba’s residential streets are unusually narrow and tortuous (one street in Córdoba, for example, is still called the Street of the Seven Windings). Motivations for this arrangement were both cultural and practical.<sup>28</sup> Islamic taste, family structure, and desire for privacy precipitated the dense collection of enclosed houses still found in Córdoba today. Medieval Islamic dwellings tended to face onto interior courtyards, rather than onto streets; this made them very private despite their proximity to one another. Because domestic activity focused inward, usually toward a central court, requirements for open space along residential streets was limited to movement and access. As I have already noted, public activity in Islamic cities of al-Andalus was concentrated in the area surrounding the mosque or outside of the city walls, thus there was little need or desire to make thoroughfares of the residential streets. Narrow culs-de-sac provided additional benefits in that they allowed branches of a single family to remain in a concentrated area which could be closed off with a gate at night or during times of civil unrest.<sup>29</sup> Exterior walls of houses in these cities demanded very little articulation or fenestration, and they were left plain.

A significant aspect of medieval Islamic technology was its reliance on animals, rather than vehicles, for transporta-

tion. Despite its breadth the Islamic empire made virtually no use of land vehicles for trade and transportation, preferring rather to use water when possible and horses (or camels, mules, etc.) otherwise. Unlike earlier Roman and Christian settlements—whose inhabitants relied heavily on wheeled carts, and consequently on broad, flat transportation routes, even within towns—Islamic settlements did not need to accommodate vehicles. There was little need to maintain broad, regular thoroughfares, and, given the spatial limitations imposed by town walls, streets were kept narrow to maximize residential space. Freed of the requirements to follow pre-established streets, houses could then be built around topographic features of the site; the streets merely needed to provide adequate drainage along natural contours, and sufficient access to houses for horses or pedestrians.

The structure of Córdoba illustrates how fundamental differences of lifestyle and belief affect the formation of a city, and in turn it illustrates how the structure of a city affects the cultural and religious outlook of its citizens. Founders of Roman colonial towns wanted to maintain contact, both physically and metaphorically, with the empire and with the heavens, this desire was enacted in the foundation ritual. Christian Visigoths allowed Córdoba to decline and disappear because it was an agrarian society unused to urban settlement. Muslims maintained, above all, a coherently differentiated and enclosed family unit maintained within the limited confines of a house, a dense quarter and a walled town. These enclosures established diffuse spiritual, rather than physical, links with the center of the religion and empire. While Roman towns were expansive and linked to Rome, they ultimately focused upon themselves. Towns in Islamic Spain, on the other hand, concentrated within a series of enclosures that directed themselves to the distant center of Islam.<sup>30</sup> The addition of other religious groups in Córdoba ultimately challenged these positions, focusing attention on internal divisions of the city, and on the strength and autonomy of a given group, particularly with respect to its physical contribution to the city’s structure. Inevitably, concentration on physical manifestations of religion helped to change Córdoba, and the very nature of the religious groups within it. This was both an incidental outcome of Christians living in a predominantly Islamic environment, and of designed efforts by Muslims to subjugate them. The Muslims, by limiting the ability of Christians and Jews to express their autonomy in built form, began slowly to engulf and absorb cultures that had remained ostensibly autonomous, thereby creating a Córdoba that can be described as neither Jewish, Christian nor Islamic, but as the product of their communion.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Rykwert describes a number of these founding rituals in Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town: The Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> This is even the case at pilgrimage sites, where religion forms a central

attraction, but the towns which grow out from them do so in response to factors other than religious ideology.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Cotterell, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Civilizations* (New York: Penguin Books) 239.

<sup>4</sup> Cotterell, 234-239.

<sup>5</sup> Rykwert 71.

<sup>6</sup> See Rykwert 41-68.

<sup>7</sup> Because the Roman settlement of Cordoba was completely obscured, the ramifications of Christianity's spread on the city are difficult to ascertain; however, it is certain that Christians continued to employ pagan traditions in the foundation of their towns well after Rome had converted. Even today traces of the rituals persist in the orthogonal plans of many Western towns. See Rykwert, 202 for a brief discussion of the blending of Christian and pagan rituals under Christian Roman Emperors.

<sup>8</sup> Don A. Halperin, *The Ancient Synagogues of the Iberian Peninsula* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1969) 1-2.

<sup>9</sup> For an accounting of the conflicts within Christianity at this time, and the consequences for Christian architecture on the Iberian Peninsula, see Jerrilynn D. Dodds, *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990) 20 - 26.

<sup>10</sup> See Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979) 110-113.

<sup>11</sup> In 694 King Egica even proposed that all Jews be enslaved. Halperin, 2, notes other anti-Jewish legislation: "Sisebut in 616 CE gave them the choice of baptism or emigration..." "Under Ervigio the Twelfth Council of Toledo put forth twenty-eight anti-Jewish laws which if carried out would have amounted to complete intolerance: the Jews must recant their faith, their property would be confiscated, and for any infringement of the law their hair would be cropped and they would be automatically punished by whipping."

<sup>12</sup> Halperin, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Spain* (Michelin Tyre Public Limited Company, 1987) 38.

<sup>14</sup> Glick, 114.

<sup>15</sup> Glick, 115.

<sup>16</sup> Glick, 116. This is a notable deviation from ancient Roman interdiction of burial in sacred ground within the walls of the city.

<sup>17</sup> The direct evidence of this in Córdoba has been obscured, but documents from Osuna in Spain surviving from the period bear out the prescriptive quality of Roman town foundations on the peninsula. See Rykwert, 134.

<sup>18</sup> Glick, 115.

<sup>19</sup> Halperin, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Halperin, 3.

<sup>21</sup> See Glick, 168.

<sup>22</sup> Dodds, 59.

<sup>23</sup> Glick, 168.

<sup>24</sup> Glick, 169.

<sup>25</sup> According to the law established by Abd al-Aziz in the eighth century. Dodds, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Dodds, 102.

<sup>27</sup> In turn, it lent to those structures built by Mozarabs who migrated north during times of oppression, a distinctly 'Arabic' aspect that heightened the differences that had crept between them and the Christians of the northern parts of the Iberian Peninsula. See Dodds, chapters 1 and 2. See also José Fernández Arenas, *Mozarabic Architecture* (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1972).

<sup>28</sup> Glick, 115-119.

<sup>29</sup> Glick, 115.

<sup>30</sup> See Glick, 247.

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