

ISLAMIC ARCHITECTURE IN THE WEST OF AL-ANDALUS: BALANCING ARCHAEOLOGY AND COMMODIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

The archaeological expression of medieval Islamic building efforts is traceable at multiple sites of the Gharb Al-Andalus, and articulates with both late antique and later dynamics. Several excavations, and subsequent conservation actions, have led to a fair understanding of specific Portuguese Islamic and Mozarabic contexts. Despite significant advances in academic research, only limited case studies allow for an insight into the challenges and benefits, both socio-economic and technical, of commodifying these tangibles. In addition to providing an overall perspective, the paper mentions a select number of built features from the Islamic period, and critically explores their heritage significance, for local communities and for visitors. Conclusions are based on heuristic, qualitative interpretations, and point at the need for sustainable integrations.

Keywords: Islamic heritage, Portugal, cultural tourism.

1 INTRODUCTION

The history of the Gharb Al-Andalus has traditionally drawn academic attention to steady, local trends, on the one hand, and occasional features that are new, or at least not seemingly stemming from a vague Roman matrix, on the other. Favouring the idea of Islamic innovation and eastern originality in the reshaping of Umayyad Spain has become a routine premise, which in turn led to a professional specialization. At the same time, late imperial archaeology greatly conditions the interpretation of early (and indeed later) Islamic buildings. While both approaches remain fairly defensible, they do not take into account the counterfactual idea that evolutions would always have occurred in some shape or form, that Visigothic settlement, production, and commerce follow distinctive regional patterns, and that comparisons either with textbook imperial examples, or with novel Mediterranean contacts, are therefore nonlinear when analysing cultural manifestations from the early medieval period.

A field where this has been acknowledged is that of material studies, which suffer from variable degrees of ambiguity, namely when technological and formal solutions evolve asymmetrically across geography and time. It is, for instance, not possible to use much later, north African, Almoravid building practices in some Portuguese defences to explain the configuration of western Al-Andalus, which had taken shape in the previous three centuries. And except in very special cases (e.g. graffiti), pottery or construction materials for daily use illustrate no political, or religious, or social distinctiveness. Even clear Islamic luxury imports or architectural configurations are never a strict marker for ethnicity or identity, either, as they say little about the individuals that transport, sell, purchase, manufacture, build, or use them. This awareness on the complexities between material culture and social history applies as well to archaeological structures, built in a given context, within the limits of agency [1], which is a fundamental starting point for discussing built heritage.



2 CONTEXT AND EXAMPLES

Deeply rooted in Spanish academia, and indebted to figures such as Bazzana [2], Gutiérrez Lloret [3], Cressier and García Arenal [4], and Guichard [5], a rich historiography on the archaeology and architecture of Al-Andalus is currently available. A general distinction is canonically established between religious, essentially mosque construction, on the one hand, and the many types of secular buildings, on the other. Pavón Maldonado [6] is a major source for both and, in the case of mosques, privileged an approach that looked more at the chronological evolutions and the evolving cultural context than at the traditional idea of architectural schools. Other dominant references for the study of Hispano-Islamic urbanism are Acién Almansa [7] and Almagro Gorbea [8], and the many local and regional findings that allow for comparative analyses. Specifically on the region this text deals with the southwestern areas of the Iberian Peninsula that correspond to southern Portugal, the research of Helena Catarino, Rosa and Mário Varela Gomes, and Susana Gómez needs to be mentioned, and also that of the several other scholars attached to the Campo Arqueológico de Mértola, with Cláudio Torres as a principal figure. Based on this existing body of literature, and rather than aiming at an architectural systematization, this paper seeks to present a few particular buildings from the Islamic period, and then navigate their cultural relevance, in particular in the scope of cultural tourism.

A first example is that of Lisbon, with its profoundly ingrained Islamic past, as much in folklore and prose as in physical remains. The claustro da Sé, as a main section of the Lisbon cathedral, is one location where the expected medieval sequences provide material evidence of a Muslim city, or at least one integrated in the complex political history of Al-Andalus. A recent controversy, involving political decisions on conservation and some ensuing academic activism, refocused public attention on the preservation of a presumed mosque underneath the cathedral [9], [10]. All major political parties issued parliamentary recommendations on the need for safeguarding the Islamic remains [11], which accompanied a clamour by multiple stakeholders, largely in administrative roles. Interest in the urban articulations of Islamic Lisbon, and the corresponding settlement patterns, have been sparked by a few municipal research projects, and above all an increase in scattered preventive archaeology activities [12]. Excavations during the 1990s [13], [14], and then from 2010 onwards, by Alexandra Gaspar and Ana Gomes, did identify Roman and some Islamic structures connected to the cathedral (Fig. 1). The former are not especially problematic, yet the latter took a certain life of their own, and became commonly associated with the central mosque. A vivid debate took place in the year 2020, when architectural conservation options forced Portuguese specialists to take a stance on the material reality, by invitation of DGPC, the Directorate-General of Cultural Heritage. Gomes and Gomes [15] are very critical of a narrative of superposition, and deconstruct most stratigraphic and typological arguments. The fact remains that the catchy designation, and the narrative of the aljama mosque quickly became a deep-rooted heritage construct.

More than 200 km south-eastwards, on the contrary, the reality of a pre-existing mosque under the church of Nossa Senhora da Assunção in Mértola is well documented, as is a late antique foundation in opus africanum, possibly connected to a basilica (see a synopsis and some archaeological results in Macias et al. [16]). Much of what survives from the 12th century pre-Christian structure is remarkable, in terms of volumetry, as the same structural walls were consecutively maintained (Fig. 2), including distinctive elements such as the mihrab and the minaret, and the many early modern references to the church's Islamic origin are well known [17]. Mértola is in fact a good example of a wider Islamic expression in the archaeological record, namely the well-defined domestic structures at the Hospedaria Beira-



Figure 1: Excavations at the Lisbon cathedral.



Figure 2: Church of Nossa Senhora da Assunção in Mértola.

Rio [18], a topographic, extramural reality indeed present at Lisbon as well – not around the cathedral, though, but at the Praça da Figueira [19].

Several other suggestive elements point at potential mosques, sometimes straightforwardly, through the several place names based on some variant of the word Mesquita (which however may relate to the rather common family name as well), connected or not to archaeological sites from the Islamic period. The national archaeological registry identifies less than twenty such cases, and they remain unverified curiosities, maybe even a result of later Christian communities identifying Muslim villages as such, not specifically referring to a mosque as a building but rather as a place. Nevertheless, iconic examples of defensive architecture are more easily identifiable in the contemporary landscape, and relate essentially to the Almoravid and the Almohad periods. Both privileged a detached (albarrã) tower building system, and the latter insisted on bent, twisted, or complicated gate entrances (in Cáceres and Badajoz, but also in the Portuguese examples of Lisbon, Elvas, Paderne, and again Mértola), as well as on the rammed earth walls, which are identifiable from the 12th century onwards, in numerous places (Elvas, Alcácer do Sal, Noudar, Moura, Serpa, Silves, Paderne, Loulé, Salir, or Tavira). All these elements have become fully integrated with previous and later traditions, and nowadays constitute distinctive local heritage [20]. Two cases are especially illustrative. First, the castle of Paderne (Fig. 3), an Almohad rammed earth fortification [21] with specific conservation challenges, and several options are available for maintaining structural coherence [22]. Social integration is ensured through educational programs, namely for students or for senior citizens, which take into account the landscape, by setting up a walking trail [23]. A second example is that of the castle of Salir [24], [25], which integrates an Almohad fortification effort (Fig. 4) that, when compared with the examples referred to above, does indicate a conspicuous constructive homogeneity [26].



Figure 3: Castle of Paderne.



Figure 4: Castle of Salir.

In the same municipality, multiple other heritage activities provide a cohesive cultural product, complementary to Salir [27], a local investment that again typifies useful social perceptions on Islamic heritage.

However, not all archaeological sites lend themselves to commodification. In addition to the passing selection of resources above, many occupations with structural impact, chronologically associable to the Islamic period, do not express any particular individuality, and materialize amidst local backgrounds, which include geological determinants, often more dominant than exogenous building traditions. Recognizing this does not invalidate the acceptance of original, eastern, societal implementations that instigated deep changes, not just late antique continuities [28]. But while external influences are a definite reality in the evolution of Islamic architecture, the expression of non-characteristic construction is still based on rather limited options. These are conditioned by pre-existences, topography, resources, and the simple laws of physics involving stability. The vast majority of Islamic settlements in the Gharb are indeed identified as such not through any unambiguous building technique, but through their associated materials, almost exclusively consisting of pottery. The transversal, ubiquitous use of medieval coarse ware, or even imports, in a domestic setting, be it urban or rural, makes a Mozarabic or Muslim (or Jewish) social distinction highly problematic, hence useless in a material outlook. Funerary or other data may shine additional light on certain contexts, as can some historical evidence. Even clearly post-Roman building techniques in an urban setting [29] do not necessarily point at unequivocal Islamic influences.

Along with mosque and defensive architecture, and some suggestive domestic planimetry (e.g. the definite originality of the courtyard houses, unrelated to imperial tradition, as demonstrated by Gutiérrez Lloret [30]), one other very clear building effort is to be mentioned, namely the creation of at least one sufi monastery and other coastal surveillance structures, with a military or lookout component, along the coastline. Exceptionally well documented examples are the ribat of Arrifana (Fig. 5), which also includes a mosque [31], and that of the Alto da VÍgia [32]. While the former was erected as an Islamic complex, with a minaret rebuilt as a watchtower after its abandonment, the latter was positioned on a Roman sanctuary, and became reused in the Modern period, again for coastal observation. Despite their topographic and functional differences, both sites are actively promoted as heritage attractions, not only in strictly political terms, by the local municipalities and their tourism development strategies, but also by the local communities that see these Islamic buildings as key elements of their local history. In both cases, civic associations engage very actively in grassroots initiatives that connect Islamic elements with all other forms of cultural heritage, not immediately from the perspective of economic opportunities.



Figure 5: Ribat of Arrifana.

3 POSITIONING TANGIBLE ISLAMIC HERITAGE

To one degree or another, all examples above exercise substantial effects on society. Their tangible nature crystallizes the idea of a detached past that otherwise is not perceived as such. Portuguese place names [33] and gastronomy [34] have been culturally understood as the product of inter-influences for a very long time, especially so when Mozarabic realities combine both Latin and Arabic elements [35]. This is not seen as problematic in any sense, whereas the physical expressions of Andalusian society offer a podium for discussion, for instance on conservation or funding options. The case of the Lisbon cathedral, referred to

above, is exemplary of candid politicking, and of academic outreach via mass media channels (namely through a sequence of newspaper opinion pieces between the end of 2020 and early 2021). But the episode was never a matter of civic engagement that could develop further than a cryptic discussion between the Directorate-General of Cultural Heritage and the Lisbon archaeology intelligentsia. In other words, the public was aware of contested technical options on the conservation of Islamic remains, but no outcry came from mainstream economic stakeholders in the cultural or tourism sectors. This indifference lays in stark contrast with Islamic tangibles perceived not as archaeology but rather as heritage. Although not a Portuguese example, and a later Nasrid expression instead of the Almohad or Almoravid ones present in the westernmost regions of Al-Andalus, the Alhambra in Granada is a fine case of a tourism destination that ignites contradictory feelings among Spanish and allochthones, residents or tourists. The use of a romanticized Islamic past for leisure and tourism reasons operates noticeably at a different level from that of coexistence with present-day Muslim communities [36].

Historical Islamic structures integrate a wider heritage configuration, with cultural tourism significance, which warrants an additional analysis. One meaningful proposition is that an archaeological resource is able to function as a multiplier in a broad-spectrum tourism mix, and as such would need to be seen in the general perspective of demand and supply. The former does not develop in a cultural void, and instead depends on consumer expectations and preconceptions on Islamic-based leisure components. The latter not merely requires quality resources or scientific relevance, but full commodification efforts that include many production factors not directly related with Islamic Heritage. Both ideally come together through community platforms providing a constructive environment, for visitors and for suppliers alike. In other words, a sustainable tourism proposal is based on conventionally packaged, centric offerings that are understood as positive, by international and domestic publics alike. This penetrates reception trends from many angles. On the segments related to Al-Andalus-based tourism potential, one needs for instance to consider non-academic ideas on neo-Arabism and neo-mudejarism [37], or in the context of History curricula, both at Portuguese and in Arab institutions [38], [39], or as components in popular belief and self-identity in Portuguese society, ranging from fado music to azulejo decoration and the language itself [40]. More than twenty years ago, a successful and well marketed itinerant exhibition was called Terras da Moura Encantada, or Lands of the Enchanted Moor, involving forty municipalities, the majority of which organized their own Islamic-inspired cultural events in the context of the exhibition [41].

Sociocultural challenges in neighbourhoods perceived as traditionally Islamic, such as the Mouraria in Lisbon [42], deal with both gentrification and multiculturalism, which provide new local identities. In this same area, Islamic archaeology is to focus more on participatory, community-based archaeology, hampered by situations of real estate development, and the concurrent commercial archaeological activity that does not favour proximity and integration with the wider society [43]. From an architectural standpoint, creativity and heritage converge in both the composition and preservation of Islamic structures, which in turn emerge from Mediterranean building inspirations [44]. In the end, this returns to a whole ethnographic understanding of how arts and crafts, and other creative folk activities, may join the notions of Al-Andalus, of cultural tourism, and of heritage usefulness to the local economy [45].

Keeping abreast of a socioeconomic pertinence, grounded on selected, sometimes random Islamic heritage elements, involves a focus on changing consumer behaviour. But tourism-centric consumption is necessarily comprehensive, and does not respond well to strict and exclusive concepts. For the average visitor, a heritage-based leisure experience encompasses



the full expression of a landscape, or a city centre, or a building. To segmentate specific Islamic heritage demand amidst a multi-layered cultural assortment is therefore unfeasible, except in the case of thematic initiatives, such as sporadic festivals or exhibitions, which are objectively measurable in terms of investment and direct effects. Still, extensive business opportunities can be explored by accommodating quality Islamic-centred leisure experiences, not only from the supply side, but by incrementing halal tourism demand, viz. by combining Andalusian heritage with digital channels [46].

Unsurprisingly, numbers for indirect and induced effects of Islamic heritage resources on the wider tourism development are not readily available. Cultural tourism statistics [47] for the years 2020 and 2021 reflect a highly erratic pattern, and an overall decrease in visitors, due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. However, the average growth rates from previous years (2015 to 2019) do record a steady growth in visitors for monuments, museums, and palaces. Economic impacts of heritage tourism on Portuguese low density territories are generally positive, and this clearly, but not solely, applies to destinations with distinctive Islamic built heritage [48], [49]. The uniqueness of a local heritage resource represents a powerful marketing instrument for enhancing a relationship with the visitor. This is not exclusive of rural destinations, as significant degrees of cultural tourism engagement are empirically observable as well in large cities such as Lisbon, with multiple, articulated heritage attractions [50]. But in the vast majority of cases, it is not possible to filter consumer behaviour from an Islamic heritage angle, as an urban tourism experience is not commodified as a sequence of segmented offerings, and instead as an inclusive combination of many different elements. Lisbon is not visited purposely because of its Islamic heritage, although this specific cultural component remains central to the complete experience.

Exceptions to the rule are large Islamic heritage events, or internationally recognized Islamic archaeological sites commodified for mass tourism, which do not exist as such in Portugal, with the possible exceptions of Mertola's festival, and also the Al Mossassa celebrations, yearly held at the town of Marvão (< Ibn Marwan); both have cross-border connections, chiefly with Spain, but are in essence regional events. What does exist is an assortment of local heritage elements that may boost forms of domestic or niche tourism. This can take the form of entrepreneurial creativity, or of academic experimentation, or of collaboration between both. A service named Storymaps [51] is built using ArcGIS web-based software tools, and is, in practice, an interactive web map offering medieval itineraries in the Alfama (< bab al-hammam) neighbourhood. It is presented as a pedestrian route through the built heritage of Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Numerous operators do offer thematic guided tours based on the same concept of discovering Islamic Lisbon. The municipal educational component referred to above, in the rural case of Paderne, is found here as well, equally sponsored and promoted by the municipality, and focused on childhood learning experiences of the Islamic city [52].

4 A CONCLUDING NOTE

A main hindrance in the effective appropriation of Islamic built heritage for tourism consumption relates less to historical correctness and more to the perception of authenticity. This has been thoroughly explored in literature, the fundamental principle being that radical accuracy is not a concern to even the educated spectator, who has quite large levels of tolerance when confronted with forms of staged authenticity. This applies to gastronomy, dance, music, and the entire set of simplifications required for the process of commodifying the Islamic past based on distinctive tangibles, namely horseshoe arches, rammed earth, minarets or mihrabs. But the reality is that, despite the originality of the civilization they develop in, most Islamic buildings do not offer any distinctive feature, or at least not one that



stereotypically may be identified as such during a tourism experience. Between parenthesis, this is often countered without much investment, by setting up tents and torches, and having staff using indistinctly wide clothes, except for the ever-present belly dancer. The fact remains, though, that surviving stone walls from the Islamic period, more often than not, are not culture-specific in their building technique, and their precise construction context is of interest to archaeologists but not to tourists. Furthermore, the branding of a cultural destination is always selective, and needs to determine the selling point of a heritage visitor attraction.

Mértola has gained an Islamic trademark after years of investment in research and leisure, yet was an important city in Roman and late antique times as well, and is still today inhabited by people that in their vast majority are not Muslim. It is however not possible to concomitantly offer everything to all without diluting a brand. One of the many sites where this is observable is Conimbriga, known as a Roman city, that remained inhabited throughout the entire Islamic period before losing prominence and turning into agricultural parcels adjacent to the village of Condeixa. A multiplicity of historical, archaeological and toponymic elements corroborate the reality of Muslim and Mozarabic communities living at Conimbriga, but the medieval structures are not monumental enough to, both from the scientific and the marketing sides, compete with the imperial ones. There is no reason whatsoever to relabel the site as “Islamic”, despite the clear burials, pottery sherds, urban transformations, and the regional Arabic or Arabicized place names.

In short, the alignment of Islamic architectural remains, archaeological experience branding, public interest, and academic research is not achievable, and arguably not even desirable. Packaging the Islamic past is inherently a staged initiative, even when traditional resources are used in responsible cultural initiatives, with positive results. Public archaeology efforts, and Islamic heritage management, can play a guiding role in calibrating leisure with awareness, ultimately leading to forms of sustainable tourism.

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