

# Spanish medieval archaeology: an approach with a brief bibliography

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## Introduction

Medieval Spain is a very peculiar period in relation to medieval Europe. In Spain it encompasses a long period (from the 5th to the 15th century) and at the same time three different civilisations, namely Visigothic, Islamic and medieval Christian. First of all, each one of these civilisations has had its own specialists since the beginning, so we can speak about:

- Visigothic Archaeology (5th to 7th centuries): This has traditionally been studied in Classical History Departments, but also in Archaeology Departments. The contribution of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Madrid has also been very important, not only on account of excavations carried out, but also on account of publications.

- Christian kingdoms (8th to 15th centuries): After the Arab conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, the Christian part was reduced to the far North of the peninsula. Therefore, from the

mid 8th century to the late 15th century we witness the conquest of the Muslim province, i.e. the conquest of al-Andalus. Several kingdoms like Asturias-León, Castilla, and Navarra and Aragón made it possible for expansion towards the South as far as the Duero river (in the 2nd quarter of the 9th century). Apparently this was caused by the Muslims' inability to sustain the demographic occupation of the territory. The archaeology of Spanish medieval kingdoms is not the most developed. The best known period is the Early Middle Ages from the 8th to the 10th century, but is at the same time the less known through the written sources. Asturias-León and Catalonia are the regions with the longest tradition in these kinds of studies.

- Al-Andalus archaeology (8th to 15th centuries): The most developed in Spain. This chapter of Spanish medieval history began to be studied after the Romantic movement. Certainly Spain has preserved a lot of Islamic monuments, which were restored from the early 20th century.



Traditionally research has been focused on Granada (Alhambra), Cordoba and Medina Azahara. Nowadays there are many other places of interest like Seville, Murcia and Badajoz. Also, researchers were previously more interested in the Omayyad period. In recent years, we have gained much more information about the Almohads and about the Nasrid dynasties. Universities, Museums and the Casa de Velázquez (dependant on the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique of France), are the institutions dealing with this discipline.

The kind of topics are very similar to those dealt with by European Medieval Archaeology. In this respect we can discern different periods:

*1) The mid 20th century*

Cemeteries, churches and metalwork were the most studied topics in Visigothic Archaeology. Caves, castros (pre-Roman fortified settlements) and cities together with restored churches and castles were common topics of Christian Archaeology. Palaces and mosques were researched by architects and art historians, to detect the buildings' structures.

*2) The 60's and the 70's*

During these years an important change came about. The research was concentrated not only on the study of exceptional artefacts or architectural structures, but also on the archaeological context and on the analysis of continuity, changes and evolution. That was a significant change that can be registered in the various aspects

and cultures. For example, in the case of Catalonia and Asturias-León the study of repopulation has been very developed, specially for the period between the 8th and the 10th century in different aspects, like the evolution of settlements, society and economy, and the frontier with al-Andalus.

The case of Al-Andalus archaeology was the complete opposite. Research was related with restoration, therefore with architects. The Alhambra, the mosque of Cordoba and Medina Azahara were managed by architects. The consequence is that we know a lot about the architectural structures but nothing about the archaeological context. So, in this case monumental archaeology was the main aim.

*3) The 80's*

The definitive change in Spanish Medieval archaeology occurred in the 80's. The reasons were:

Firstly, in 1981 the Spanish Association for medieval archaeology was founded. Academics and experts from universities, museums and the state administration formed an association to demand a place in Spanish archaeology, and to establish means of contact.

Secondly, In 1985 the first Spanish Congress of Medieval Archaeology took place in Huesca. This is a very important date, not only because it was the first general meeting, but also because of the Acts (five volumes devoted to: Methodology (I), Visigothic (II), Andalusí (III and IV), and Christian (IV and V) archaeology.

Many other congresses have taken place in recent years:

- The 2nd in Madrid in 1987
- The 3rd in Oviedo in 1989
- The 4th in Alicante in 1993
- The 5th in Valladolid in 1999

Thirdly, in 1986 issue 0 of the *Boletín de Arqueología Medieval* was published. This started life as a book with modest pretensions, but began to receive many more contributions after 1989.

### Topics and aspects of al-Andalus archaeology

Since the Arab conquest (711–716) to the final defeat of the Nasrid's reign (1492), we have eight hundred years of Arab civilisation in the Iberian Peninsula. We should have in mind three different periods, which are:

#### 1) *Cordoba's Emirat and Caliphate (713–1031)*

Especially important in this period was the Umayyad dynasty coming from Syria after 756. Two and a half centuries, during which occurred the islamisation of Visigothic Hispania. In these years began the transformation from cities, the permanent existence of a frontier with Christian reigns, the new territorial organization and evidently the beginning of a new culture in West Europe.

#### 2) *Petty kings and Almoravids (1031–1147)*

The petty kings signified the breakdown of the Caliphate and the

birth of a large quantity of small polities reigned by small dynasties. At this time took place important changes in the organisation of the territory, especially a very intensive process of fortification.

The Almoravids was a North African dynasty, which entered the Iberian peninsula helping the petty kings against the Christian kings, and finally conquered each of them, converting al-Andalus into another province of their North African empire.

This century signified a continuity of the Umayyad period. The architecture continued to be in the same way, but normally more decorated.

#### 3) *Almohad caliphate (1147–1212 or 1248)*

This is a very unknown period at the moment, but it seems to have been a very important century. Al-Andalus was much smaller, and to resist the Christian conquest they had to reorganise the frontier and the territory, specifically the fortifications. At the same time came a definitive aesthetic change. A new architecture characterised by huge buildings, a process typical for the period after 1172 and existing throughout the Middle Ages.

The final development of this renovation was Granada's Nasrid reign (1232–1492), with a similar development like the Umayyad caliphate and the petty kings. That means, the same aesthetic with more complicated decoration.



In the research of al-Andalus archaeology, the researchers were at the beginning dealing with art and architecture and very little with archaeology. Basic studies were published in the 50's by Manuel Gómez Moreno and Leopoldo Torres Balbás; the most studied sites were the Cordoba mosque, Medina Azahara and the Alhambra palace in Granada.

Since 1985 we are experiencing a real explosion of publications, this time with scientific archaeological approaches, but probably with a lack of ambitious projects.

### Cities, towns

#### 1) *The urban structure (Fig. 1 and 2)*

The Iberian Peninsula was an intensively urbanised area even before the Arab conquest. There was a continuity in places with pre-Roman or Roman origins. This was the same situation as in Syria; christian cities with an organised housing scheme, and sometimes fortified. The islamisation of these pre-Islamic cities consisted in:

- The transformations of churches into mosques. At the beginning the same building was used for both cults, afterwards the church was destroyed and in the same place a mosque constructed. We know a few examples, like Cordoba's Friday mosque, and the first Friday mosque in Seville, named Ibn Adabbas.

- The birth of a political centre, named alcázar, next to the Friday mosque. Palace areas were constructed at one extreme of the city walls, with possible contact with the outskirts of cities. This was named Dar al-Imara.

- The development of the market area around the Friday mosque. The different arts and crafts were organised in categories, and depending on this they were near or far from the temple.

We don't know exactly the chronology of the cities' islamisation, because there are few serious projects or urban archaeology. For example, in the case of Seville we can say through the written and archaeological sources that until the middle of the 12th century the Roman Hispalis was respected. There were evidently important changes because they built a Friday mosque in 829 and at the same time there existed a governor's palace (Dar al-Imara) and a princely palace on the outskirts of the city.

In the case of Cordoba, the first phase of the mosque was not built until 788, that means 77 years after the Arab conquest.

After the Arab conquest pre-Islamic cities still existed, continuity and islamisation was the common situation, but there were also cities founded by the muslims, the most interesting example without doubt is Medina Azahara. This city was founded by the first caliph of Cordoba, Abd al-Rahman III in 937 and existed until





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Fig.2. Seville scityplan with the two urbanization phases, which are: 1) The plan until the middle of the 12th century, where we can see the Friday mosque and the alcázar at the city border. At the outskirts was also built a prince palace. 2) The Almohad expansion was really significant. Not only because the walled surface was much larger, also because they renovated the cultural and political centre of the city. The political centre (alcázar) went through a definitive change, from a group of palaces into a city within the city, formed by many enclosures with different functions. They were dedicated to gardens, orchards, cemeteries, workshop areas or palaces.

Every al-Andalus king or caliph in the next centuries tried to know Medina Azahara and to reuse some architectural elements, and also to be inspired by the decoration.

### 2) *The city walls*

Most of the cities that the conquerors found had Roman walls. Some of them, in places next to the frontier with the Christians were preserved; but commonly they were abandoned, and probably the stones were reused

in new buildings. So the Zaragoza's city walls still existed after the conquest, while Seville's city walls were abandoned and that is the reason why the Vikings did not have problems to enter the city in 844.

Created cities, like Medina Azahara, Badajoz or Murcia were fortified. But we should speak not only about the construction, but also about the destruction of some of them, especially in the case of rebellion against



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Fig.3.ReusedRomanstonesinSeville salcazarenclosure.

Cordoba. This is the case of Merida or Écija, both very important towns in Roman times, but in decadence after the 9th century.

Militarisation was a constant through the al-Andalus history from the beginning to the end. The walls not only defined the city, they protected it, and the leaders also defended themselves against the citizens.

Umayyad walls were normally built in stone (Sillares), and we have many examples in Merida, Balaguer or Seville (Fig. 3). But the most frequent building material was tabiya (fig. 4). This is a mixture of soil, water and lime put in a wooden mould. The hardness

could be like stone, it depends on the lime quantity added. Bricks were very common in al-Andalus since the 9th century. It was used for pavements, vaults and arches. At the end of the 12th century it began to be used for complete buildings.

The majority of the city walls that we can see today were built after the 12th century, and only partly we can find fragments of earlier phases. The more frequent cases come from the Almohads and the Nasrid era.

### 3) *The palaces*

A very intensive, urbanised civilisation had to have lots of palaces. Today very few still exist and many of them are mutilated. We can find palaces

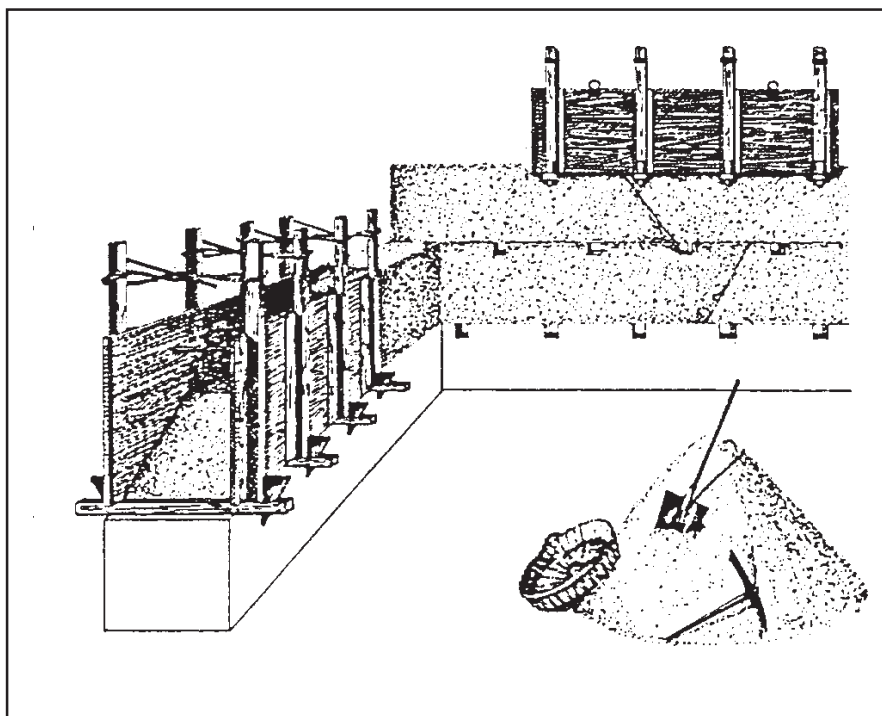


Fig4.Tabiya.

from the 10th to the 15th century.

It is important to state that the layout of these palaces has a repetitive structure during this long period. We can see buildings in a rectangular form organised with a central patio and rooms around. The principal rooms used to be in the shorter wings, sometimes exclusively so. The patio is a garden and it is used as a house space.

While the structure of these palaces was repeated, we can see an evolution in decoration. The Omayyad models survive until the second half of the 12th century, with some development, but the strongest aesthetic change took place with Almohads. (Fig 5 and 6)

The high temperatures in summer made it necessary to construct summer palaces. In the case of hot weather they used to make underground or semi-underground palaces. In the Alhambra, next to the Sierra Nevada mountains, it was not necessary, but they built in the highest area of this place pavilions surrounded by gardens. Vegetation and water was essential for this kind of aristocratic houses. At the same time, emirs, kings or caliphs used to construct an almunia at the outskirts of the cities in places with a nice view and good communications with the alcázar. (Fig. 7)



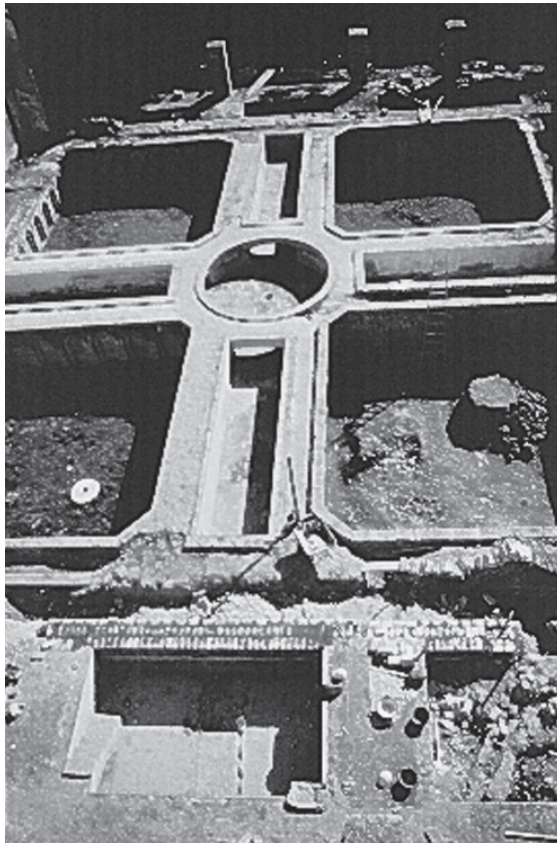


Fig.5.PalaceofSeville salcazar. Itisaverycommontype,across-garden,organisedintwopassages andfourgardenspaces.Vegetation inIslamicgardenswasveryrich, theyusedtomixalotofplants,local andimported,vegetablesandornamental.

#### 4) *The mosques*

Mosques comprise three elements:

- The Patio, bigger than the prayer hall, is the place to make ablutions, to have a rest, to administer justice and the place of the Koranic school. It is also the space used as a prayer hall on Fridays.

- The tower or minaret, use to advise the citizens about the prayer time. In al-Andalus minarets are frequently situated next to the main gate of the patio, in the north side.

- The prayer hall, evidently the

most important element. Al-Andalus mosques were orientated to the South, the south wall is much wider than the others. In the centre is a niche named mihrab, which indicated the direction for the prayer.

We must note that there are different kinds of mosques: the most important is the Friday mosque (comparable to a cathedral with the Christians), further there are district's mosques named masyid (like parish churches) and also oratories. Only the Friday mosques have the three elements (patio, minaret and prayer hall),



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Fig.6.Damas torreofthe Alhambra. The Nasrid developedtheinnovationsof theAlmohads.Theybuiltmuch biggertowersandinthiscase withthethrone-roominside. Theuseoftowersaspartof palaceswasaninnovationof the14thcentury.

the rest could have all the three or not, and only the prayer hall was essential. (Fig.8)

##### 5) *The markets*

There were different market types. The most important was around the Friday mosque, but around the district mosques existed markets for basic products. At the outskirts were markets for raw materials, like charcoal or firewood.

The market was organised in bazaars each one specialised in certain products, like fabrics, jewellery or spices.

Each street was devoted to the same product, this was the system to avoid competition.

In the market area were specific types of buildings like a magazine and a pension; this is the case of the salt market or the cereal market - the name is *alhóndiga* - but also the luxury merchandises used to have a specific building or a group of streets with controlled gates, by the name of *alcaicería*.

In this area were lots of small oratories, and also baths. The structure



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Fig.7.Buhayrapalace.This type of residence was signified by huge gardens and orchards organised around a big reservoir. This one was founded in 1172 by an Almohad caliph.

of these baths were very peculiar. They have a cold room, a warm room and a hot room. The second one is the biggest. There are no swimming-pools like in the Roman baths; water must constantly be renewed.

### Rural landscape and settlement

This is one of the less known aspects of Medieval Spain, the reason being the lack of research until recent years. Regarding the landscape there are many publications about irrigation from the last ten years, which is the clearest evidence of al-Andalus agriculture that we have at present. Almería, Valencia and Mallorca are the best known areas. The increase of this type of agriculture was related to

the food habits. Muslims used to eat lots of vegetables and fruits. They introduced a number of crops, many of them originating from China, into the Iberian peninsula. Such was the case with sugar cane, rice, cotton, fruit-trees and many vegetables like spinach, aubergine, and aromatic plants. They introduced crops typical of their diet like palmier, lemon, and fig tree.

How was the territory organised? More and more approaches to this aspect are presented. Territories were organised in provinces (coras) and divided into districts (aqalim). The main centre was a city or town (medina) and the district centres were normally castles (hisn or qala) and exceptionally villages (al-qarya).



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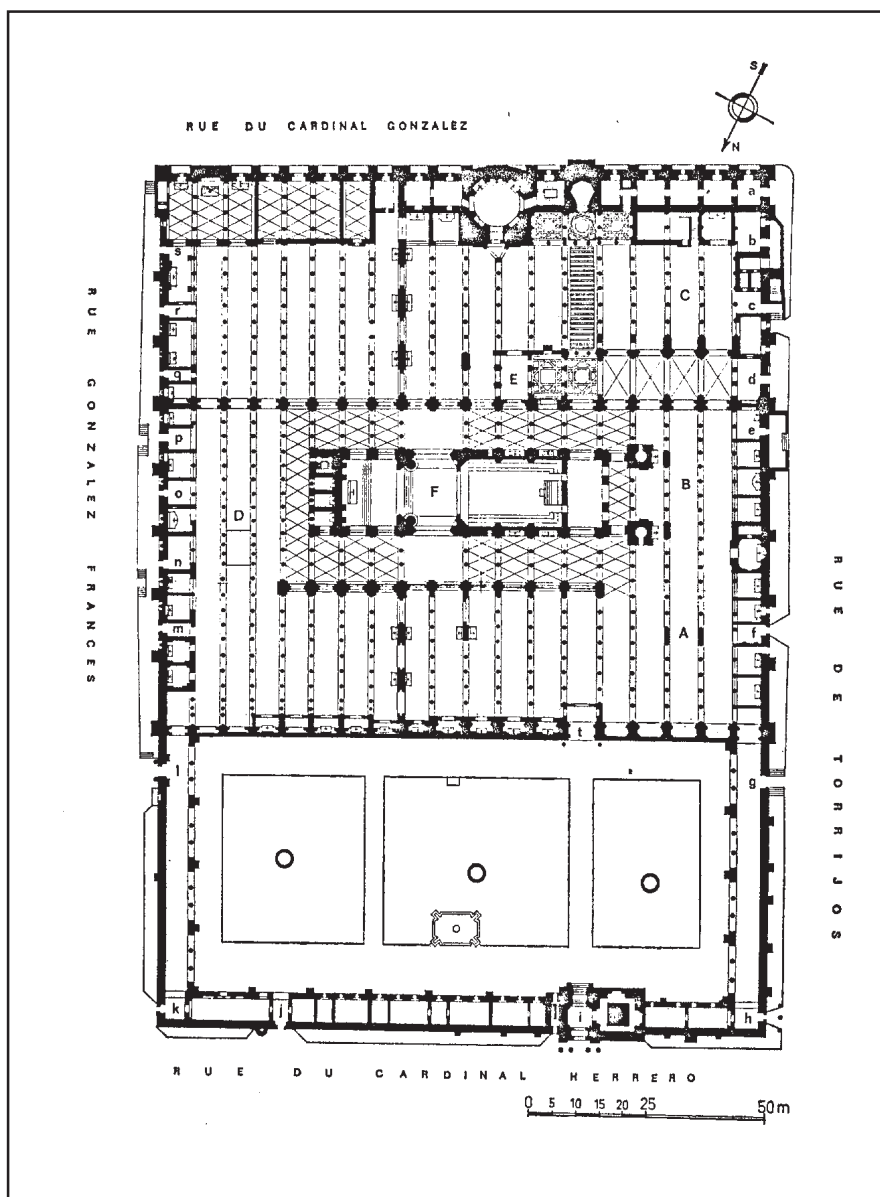


Fig.8.Cordoba smosque.Itisperhapsthemostimportantbuildinginal-Andalusfordifferentreasons;from thepointofviewofhistoriansitwaslikethearchitecturalmanualforallthefollowingbuildings.Theorientation, thestructure,thearchitecturalelements,thedecorationwasaninspirationforgenerations.Thisbuildinghasmany phases,theconstructionbeganin788andcontinueduntiltheendofthe10thcentury.Thefounderwasthefirst Umayyad semirinal-Andalus,Abdal-RahmanI.ThisprincemadeatypicalSyrianmosque,butwithsomelocal elementsslikethehorseshoearch.





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Fig.9 Banos de la Encina castle (Jaén)

We can mention as a case study the Aljarafe (fig.10). At the time of the Christian conquest, it consisted of three castles (Hisn al-Qasr, Solucar and Hisn al-Faray). Depending on Hisn al-Faray (approximately 25.669

Hc) were 69 villages; we have found 38 of them, but only 12 of the villages are still existing.

We can discern different types of settlement: castles, villages and coun-



Fig.10. Cuatrovita's village in the Aljarafe (Sevilla). Church and tower (old mosque and minaret).

try houses. From the beginning Arabs used to built in stone, but also in tabiya. We can discern two periods:

- From the 8th to the 10th century. Many pre-Islamic castles were re-used, specially in rural areas far from cities. We know, through the written sources, some of these buildings constructed to face rebels, to control frontiers, or to function as a camp.

- After the fall of the Cordoba caliphate (1009) began an intensive fortification process not only on the frontiers, but also in the interior. The reason was the permanent war between many of the petty kings. After that the insecurity and the expeditions of Christians into al-Andalus territory became more and more common, so there were many castles built at the top of the hills.

We can discern different sizes and functions in castles.

- Qala, which means a big castle, formed by an alcázar, a fortified bailey and sometimes also a fortified suburb. These fortifications relate to very rich valleys from an agricultural the point of view, or with a river with water mills.

- Hisn, is a smaller castle formed by alcázar and a walled village. We know that these castles had a territory depending on them, and that they were connected to the political centres of the province, the city or the madina.

- Sajra, small fortifications in a very high position as a refuge for the population. Among the examples of this type we can find very simple archi-



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tectural structures made by the rural population. Sometimes these castles were in important routes. (Fig. 9)

- Borj (towers). We do not know many of them, but we know through the written sources that they should have been very common, specially after the 12th century. During the Nasrid period these towers began to be bigger and with complicated interior divisions. So they were used as a houses.

As regards the villages, we do not know at the moment the structure of andalusi villages. The only case studied at the moment is Torre Bufilla in Valencia, and there we can see a very well organised settlement with a geometrical layout.

#### Briefannotatedbibliography

If we consider present-day publications, we find an incredible wealth of them. Lots of books, articles in reviews, acts of congresses. So it is really impossible to keep track of all of them. Last year many contributions were published, not only in Spanish, but also in regional languages like Catalanian, Valencian, Mallorquin or Gallego. This situation sometimes makes it very difficult for contact to be maintained among Spanish researchers.

If we have a look at the publications written in English, French or German, this problem is certainly less significant. The researching foreign institutions have their own reviews:

The Casa de Velázquez has the *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*. The Deutsches Archäologisches Institut has the *Madriider Mitteilungen*.

Both of them usually have only a few articles on Medieval Archaeology each year, because they are devoted to all the different branches studied by their researchers. In any case, archaeologists are involved in concrete projects or regional areas. For example, the Casa de Velázquez has been working for several years in the Eastern part of Spain, specially in the Levante region through the archaeologist André Bazzana and the historian Pierre Guichard; but also Patrice Cressier has been researching into the province of Granada, and more recently into Morocco.

The Casa de Velázquez also publishes many other books, like the acts of *Castrum* (I, Lyon, 1983; II, Rome, 1988; III, Madrid, 1988; IV, Madrid, 1992) or monographs like: *Les châteaux ruraux d'al-Andalus. Histoire et archéologie des husun du sud-est de l'Espagne*. Madrid. 1988 written by André Bazzana, Patrice Cressier and Pierre Guichard or *Maison d'al-Andalus*. Madrid. 1992, written by André Bazzana.

In the case of D.A.I. they have a long-term project in Recópolis (Guadalajara), a city founded by the Visigoths, and abandoned after them. At the same time, the architect Christian Ewert has been working on many Islamic buildings like the Aljafería palace in Zaragoza, Medina Azahara



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in Córdoba, various mosques in Toledo, and also researching in Morocco, specifically on Almohad mosques.

But there are also some Hispanists who are not connected to these kinds of institutions. Some of them have published work in recent years like:

Christine Mazzoli-Guintard. *Villes d'al-Andalus. L'Espagne et le Portugal à l'époque musulmane (VIIIe-XVe siècles)*. Rennes. 1996.

Thomas F. Glick. *From Muslim fortress to Christian castle*. Trowbridge. 1995.

The best way to find some publications from Spanish archaeologists

are in the acts of *Medieval Europe*, 1992 and 1997, the first international meetings for European Medieval Archaeology. Each one of the acts, which are divided into seven different areas, have some articles. In some cases they were written by Spanish archaeologists, and, in others by Hispanists. There are some significant gaps, and nothing about important research projects like L'Esquerdá a Catalonia developed by Inma Ollich.

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