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e-Forschungsberichte Faszikel 2 (2023) 1–24 (§)

<https://doi.org/10.34780/j0db-cb53>

Herausgebende Institution / Publisher:
Deutsches Archäologisches Institut

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MADĪNAT AL-ZAHRĀ', SPAIN A Pottery Ensemble from the Patio de Pilares



Research carried out between March 2019 and February 2020

Madrid Department of the German Archaeological Institute
by Alejandro I. Martín García



e-FORSCHUNGSBERICHTE DES DAI 2023 · Faszikel 2

Cooperation partners: Universidad Autonoma Madrid;
Conjunto Arqueológico de Madinat al-Zahra.

Financial support: DAI Research Scholarship 2020.

Head of project: Fernando Valdés.

Team: Alejandro I. Martín.

Madīnat al-Zahrā' ist eine archäologische Stätte in der Nähe der Stadt Córdoba (Spanien), knapp 7 km entfernt, die 940 n. Chr. vom Kalifen 'Abd al-Rahmān III. gegründet wurde, wenige Jahre nach der Ausrufung des Kalifats. Dieser Ort ist von großer Bedeutung, da er bis 1010 n. Chr. als Palaststadt diente, bis er durch die Fitna, den Bürgerkrieg in al-Andalus, zerstört wurde. Die in diesem Beitrag vorgestellten Forschungsarbeiten konzentrieren sich auf die Untersuchung der Keramik aus dem als »Patio de los Pilares« bekannten Raum, einem Ort, der verschiedene Fragen zu seiner Funktion und seinen Phasen aufwirft. Das Material wurde in einem geschlossenen Bereich innerhalb einer nachvollziehbaren Strati-graphie gefunden, so dass eines der Hauptziele darin besteht, eine möglichst klar definierte Chronologie vorzulegen, die als Referenz für die Zukunft dienen kann. Ein großer Teil des Materials gehört zu einem Abfallkontext, was insofern interessant ist, als es uns erlaubt, uns dem Alltagsleben des Ortes in dieser Zeit anzunähern, insbesondere den Dienstleistungen.

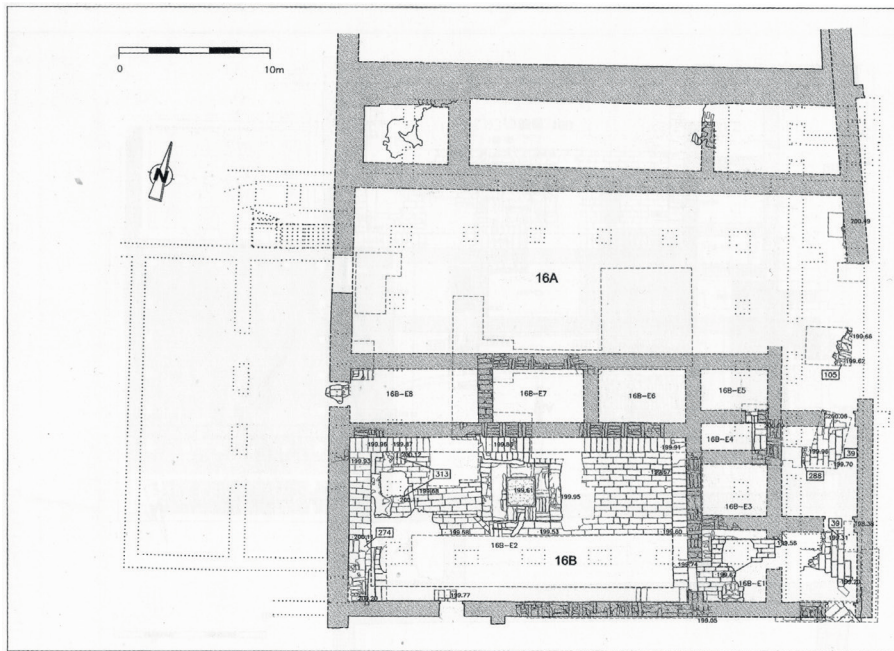


1 »Patio de los Pilares« at the beginning of the conservation work. (Photo: Conjunto Arqueológico de Medina Azahara, Manuel Pijuán)

Madīnat al-Zahrā' is an archaeological site located near the city of Córdoba (Spain), barely 7 km away, founded in 940 CE by Caliph 'Abd al-Rahmān III, a few years after the proclamation of the caliphate. This place is extremely important due to its status as a palatine city until 1010 CE, the year that marks its end and destruction as a result of the fitna, the civil war that took place in al-Andalus. This research focuses on the study of pottery in the space known as »Patio de los Pilares«, a place that presents different questions about its function and phases. This material was found in an enclosed area within a reliable stratigraphy, so one of the main objectives is to present a chronology that is as clearly defined as possible in order to serve as a reference in the future. A large part of the material corresponds to a waste context, which is interesting as it allows us to get closer to more daily aspects of the archaeological site, especially service tasks.

Introduction

- 1 Research on [Madīnat al-Zahrā'](#)⁷ can help us to understand different aspects of the caliph's court, the organisation of the city, the lifestyle, the architectural and decorative programme, etc. Much of this research, especially in the first half of the 20th century, was carried out without a reliable archaeological record due to its methodology. Specifically, in relation to ceramic studies, this research focused especially on artistic and decorative aspects, giving greater importance to the most striking ceramics, especially polychrome tin glaze production known as »verde y manganeso«, lustre ware, and other polychrome tin glaze production known as »cuerda seca«, so that, although important, they were more superficial studies.
- 2 A few decades later, more in-depth studies were to be carried out, applying a more exhaustive and archaeological methodology. Thanks to these studies, systematisations and typological classifications according to shape began to be made, and attention was paid to different aspects, such as the study of pastes. At the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, new methodologies began to be applied, especially archaeometry, which



2 Plan corresponding to the phases ›Pilares 1‹ and ›Pilares 2‹, showing ›Casa 16A‹ and ›Casa 16B‹. (Plan: Conjunto Arqueológico de Medina Azahara, Vallejo u. a. 2004, 238 fig. 10)

provided a more scientific approach thanks to the application of physical and chemical analysis techniques.

- 3 Therefore, although great progress has already been made in terms of research on pottery material, present and future research must face the challenge of answering the questions that are still open and providing information that remains to be known.

Interventions in ›Patio de los Pilares‹

- 4 The space known as ›Patio de los Pilares‹ (Courtyard of the Pillars, Fig 1) is located in the western part of Alcazar of Madīnat al-Zahrā', next to »Viviendas superiores« and »Viviendas de servicio«, which in addition to corresponding to the residential area of the caliph and his court, also housed other functions such as administrative and religious. ›Patio de los Pilares‹ is organised around a large central quadrangular courtyard surrounded by pillars, hence its name, together with different rooms and corridors. In the centre of the courtyard was located a Roman sarcophagus that was used as a font.

- 5 During conservation works on certain areas of the so-called private zone of the Alcazar and, in particular, the consolidation of the walls, plaster and floors, and the replacement of decoration and pieces in their place of origin, specific and limited interventions were carried out between 1998 and 2004 to investigate these spaces.

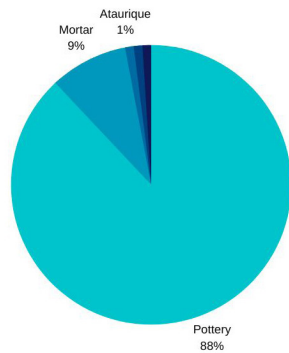
- 6 Therefore, during the execution of these tasks in ›Patio de los Pilares‹, structures were discovered that confirmed the existence of a prior phase to the one known and visible today, something that was intuited and deduced thanks to the conservation of some architectural elements.

- 7 These finds, located under the mortar beds, mainly correspond to dwellings and structures from different phases (Fig. 2). The first one, designated as »Pilares 1«, in which the regularisation of the land can be seen, as well as the construction of two dwellings. The first one, called »Casa 16A«, is located in the northern part, in a rather deteriorated state, and the second one, »Casa 16B«, is located in the southern part of this



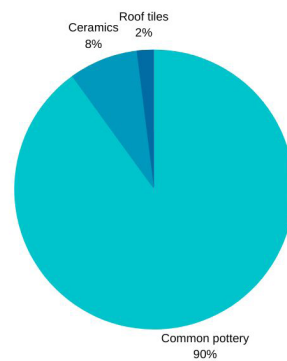
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Total archaeological material



4

Classification by pottery type



5

3 Photogrammetry of the pool in which a large amount of archaeological material was found. (Photogrammetry: Alejandro I. Martín)

4 Graph showing the most numerous archaeological material found in the intervention. (Graphic: Alejandro I. Martín)

5 Graph showing ceramics classified by type. (Graphic: Alejandro I. Martín)

space. This was structured around two bays of rooms and a rectangular courtyard in which a small pool was located.

8 In relation to the pipelines, we can differentiate between different phases. We can detect modifications in relation to ›Casa 16B‹ that would correspond to a reform of the space, corresponding to a second phase, known as »Pilares 2« [1].

9 The pool has a square shape, with a dimension of 1.8 m on each side (Fig. 3). To facilitate access, two steps were built as a small staircase on two sides of the structure, which is raised above the pavement.

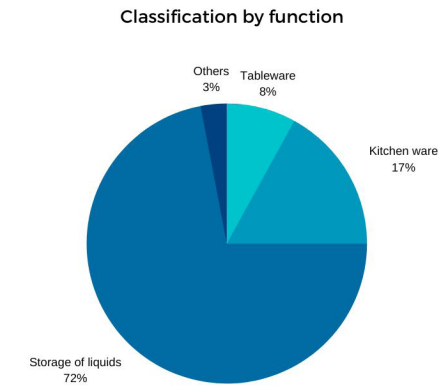
10 In addition to the discovery of the pool, the fill that it contained was extremely interesting, as numerous materials were found inside it, including pottery, remains of microfauna as well as decorative and architectural fragments. Therefore, this space was filled with waste material before the implementation of a new architectural programme, whereby the old structures were dismantled to form a later phase. After this reorganisation, the resulting space is what can be seen today in the archaeological site of Madīnat al-Zahrā', corresponding to »Pilares 3« phase.

Approach to Pottery

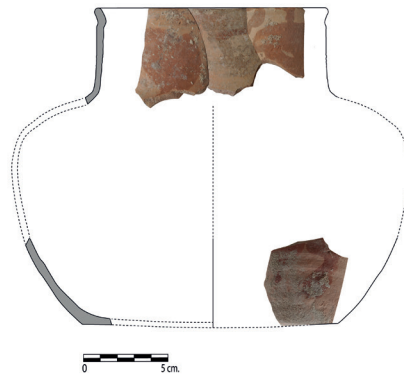
11 Pottery constituted one of the most abundant archaeological remains of the aforementioned interventions, accounting for 88 % of the total [2], with a total of 1370 pieces (Fig. 4). Therefore, its study is important in order to know more details about the space that was configured in the early phases of ›Patio de los Pilares‹, as well as different aspects related to pottery, such as its technology, dispersion, production or exchanges.

12 The most abundant pottery type found was common pottery (90 %), which is abundant in sites and contexts of this period (Fig. 5). Its study has been traditionally relegated to other types, usually glazed ceramics, which are more eye-catching and striking. Research into common pottery provides a better understanding of other aspects and areas, especially those related to everyday life, domestic chores and productive tasks.

13 Among the common pottery documented, the most numerous corresponds to pottery intended for storing liquids (Fig. 6). Within this type, there



6



7



8

6 Graph showing ceramics classified according to their function. (Graphic: Alejandro I. Martín)

7 Mouth and base of pitcher corresponding to Type II. (Drawing: Alejandro I. Martín)

8 Geometric and epigraphic decorations on pitchers. (Drawing: Alejandro I. Martín)

are different forms, but the most common is represented by the pitcher form, with two different variants, differing especially in the shape of the mouth.

14 The first, with an unstable flat base, ovoid body, narrow and flared neck, trilobed mouth and, frequently, they have a thickened or bifid rim, corresponding to Type II (Fig. 7) [3]. It has a high filtering capacity, both in the mouth and in the body, and pieces of different sizes have been documented, so there are three subtypes. The second, with a slightly smaller size, with an unstable flat base, flattened globular body, cylindrical neck and normally straight rim thickened and triangular inwards, would correspond to Type I [4].

15 Both variants show decorations of geometric motifs, especially circular shapes together with circular bands surrounding the piece. There are some fragments that show epigraphic motifs and typed traces relating to the fingers of Fatima, with a marked prophylactic character (Fig. 8).

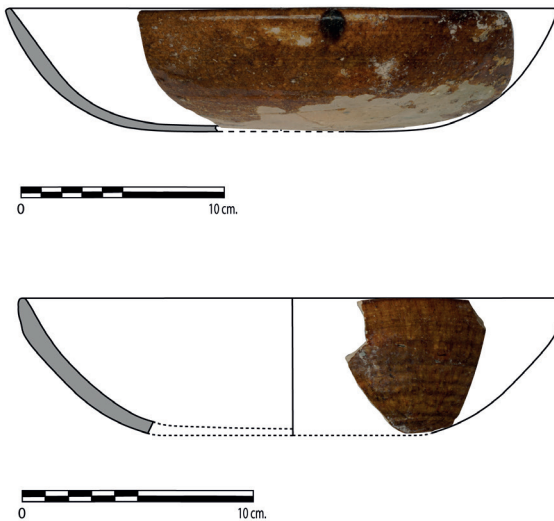
16 The second most numerous type is kitchenware. They are predominantly pots with an unstable flat base, globular body and moulded rim (Fig. 9). They tend to be somewhat flattened and come in different sizes, although the presumably larger forms are no more than 15 cm high. For this type of pottery, reddish or dark-brown, slightly decanted clays are used, with frequent medium or fine-grained temper, thus providing greater elasticity for exposure to the fire for cooking.

17 Although it is not the most numerous type, glazed ceramics provide important data. In this case, its use would be related to tableware and there are different typologies, decorations and technologies. From the typological point of view, all the pieces correspond to »ataifor«, while according to decoration and technology, there are different types. The most characteristic is the type known as »verde y manganeso«, of which some pieces were found in good condition during the intervention and which deserve detailed research. In general, these pieces are simple in shape and have primitive decorations with respect to the decorative programme that was to be developed later.

18 The most common type of glazed ceramics is represented by the honey-coloured monochrome, sometimes with decorations in the form of



9



10

9 Set of pots and their possible complete form. (Drawing: Alejandro I. Martín)

10 Honey-coloured monochrome pieces. (Drawing: Alejandro I. Martín)

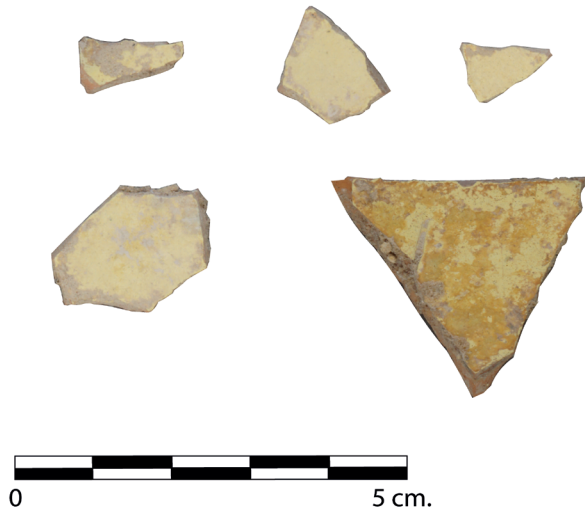
manganese traces (Fig. 10). The opposite is the case with the discovery of some fragments of yellow ceramics (Fig. 11). This is a unique type due to its limited presence in Madīnat al-Zahrā' and in the Iberian Peninsula [5], which suggests that it may have been imported, not only because of its limited presence, but also because of its decoration and technology [6].

19 This research is still at an early stage, so it is still too early to present a conclusive hypothesis. After a first approach and with the available data, we can point out the predominance of pottery intended for the storage of liquids, especially in relation to the small pool and a possible fountain, so that the space corresponding to the first phases of ›Patio de los Pilares‹ can be attributed to functions intended for services.

20 As for the chronology provided by the material, it is difficult to specify an exact and precise chronology due to the chronological range of most of the pieces. In general, it is pottery that fits from the mid-10th century onwards, compared with other sites and finds, especially in Córdoba ⁷.

21 Similarly, ceramics such as ›verde y manganeso‹ ware have traditionally been dated to the second half of the 10th century, with Madīnat al-Zahrā' as place of origin, especially as ceramics created and promoted by the Umayyad caliphate, but some studies are dating them to the late 9th and early 10th centuries [7], which would place them in the Emirate period. In this case, the ›verde y manganeso‹ ceramics found do not seem to predate the construction of the city since, although they obey somewhat primitive patterns, they seem to respond to the decorative programmes of the caliphate.

22 With regard to the date of construction of the first phase, it was placed in the 940s, corresponding to the construction of the city and, a time later, the reforms of the second phase. However, it is more problematic to establish a date for the third phase, but it is important because it completely reconfigures this space. Some authors consider that the date of the reform would be in the 950s, in parallel with the construction of the place called ›Salón Rico‹, as the layout of the pipeline in the third phase of the ›Patio de los Pilares‹ would correspond to those in ›Jardín Alto‹[8].



11 Yellow glazed ceramic. (Photo: Alejandro I. Martín)

Conclusion

- 23 In conclusion, this study adds to other research that demonstrates that the city of Madīnat al-Zahrā' had different phases through different urban planning programmes throughout its short life as a caliphate city [9].
- 24 The main objective of the present research, which is still in its early stage, is to present an in-depth ceramic study with a fairly well-defined chronology in the future. It possibly starts from the founding moment in the year 940 until, presumably, the 950s, the date in which some authors date one of the main urban development programmes carried out in the city, although it is hoped, through the present study, to be able to offer more detailed chronologies and information in the future.

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Endnotes

[1] Vallejo u. a. 2004.

[2] Microfaunal remains are also important, but have not yet been quantified and studied.

[3] Vallejo – Escudero 1998.

[4] Vallejo – Escudero 1998.

[5] Valdés 1988.

[6] Salinas u. a. 2019.

[7] Salinas – Pradell 2020.

[8] Vallejo u. a. 2004.

[9] Arnold 2019.

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Metadaten

Title/*title*: Madīnat al-Zahrā', Spain. A Pottery Ensemble from the Patio de Pilares. Research carried out between March 2019 and February 2020

Band/*issue*: e-Forschungsberichte 2023-2

Bitte zitieren Sie diesen Beitrag folgenderweise/*Please cite the article as follows*: A. I. Martín, Madīnat al-Zahrā', Spain. A Pottery Ensemble from the Patio de Pilares. Research carried out between March 2019 and February 2020, eDAI-F 2023-2, § 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.34780/j0db-cb53>

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Online veröffentlicht am/*Online published on*: Datum###.##.2023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34780/j0db-cb53>

Schlagworte/*keywords*: Ceramics, Córdoba, Glazed Ware, Iberian Peninsula, Madīnat al-Zahrā', Medieval archaeology, Pottery

Bibliographischer Datensatz/*Bibliographic reference*: <https://zenon.dainst.org/Record/003057214>