

Great Mosque at Córdoba



Date: 784-6 CE foundation, expanded in 833, 852, 961, 976, and 987

Architect: unknown

Patron: Emir Adb al-Rahman (731 Palmyra, Syria - 788)

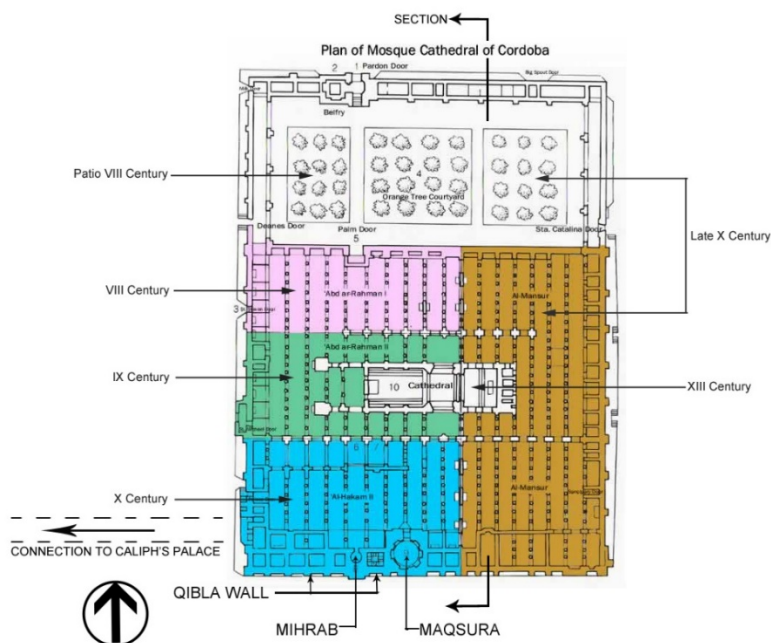
Function: Mosque - a Muslim place of worship (the cross shaped cathedral in the centre was added later)

Nationality: Arab Umayyad dynasty 711-1032, with origins in Damascus

Location: Córdoba, Al-Andalus (now Spain) - the centre of the western Islamic world until C13th

Materials: marble, stone, brick, mosaic, gilding

Scale: 24,000 square metres



ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

- Mosque design requires four main elements: it must face Mecca (shown by position of the *mihrab*), it must have access to running water (fountain), a minaret (in this case a squat tower) for the muezzin to call Muslims to prayer, and a covered prayer hall. The mosque at Cordoba was the central Friday mosque where the ruler led the prayer. As the population grew so the design expanded over 200 years.
- There is no prescribed floor plan for a mosque, so the patron Abd al-Rahman followed the plan and style of the Great Mosque in Damascus, a *hypostyle mosque* with many columns and a double height to the arches. It was rectangular in plan, subdivided into the hypostyle prayer hall in the south supported by parallel arcades - ten arcades divided into 11 naves, all perpendicular to the *qibla* and *mihrab* on the southern wall, a high vault, and a courtyard at the northern end, with an arcade or covered walkway around the inside and a minaret on the north wall.
- Expansions to plan included a linked walkway to the Palace of the Emir and a *maqsura* (area of sanctuary reserved for the imam or later the caliph).
- Columns of the ground level of the hypostyle hall are 'spolia' - reused Roman dark marble columns with Corinthian capitals, cut down to 3m
- The arcades are made using innovative double-tiered arches, with a first arch springing from imposts above the Corinthian capitals, and the second from the pier above the impost. These are made in an alternating pattern of red and white brick with stone voussoirs. The double-arches function to raise the vault and allow light into the prayer-hall.
- *Mihrab* (a niche in the wall which symbolises the place where the prophet Mohammed stood when he addressed the faithful in the mosque at Medina) is in the centre of the *qibla* and traditionally identifies the direction of Mecca. In Cordoba it is actually too far to the south rather than east which might be due to copying the mosque at Damascus which is north of Mecca. In Cordoba the *mihrab* is a tiny room with a conch-shaped roof
- *Horseshow arch* before the *mihrab* is ornamented with gold, blue and red tesserae and vegetable motifs (humans and animals cannot be represented in a mosque) and Arabic calligraphic text from the Koran, the word of God.
- The dome above the *mihrab* has an internal form which is scalloped or shell-like and ornamented with gold mosaic, vegetable motifs and text around the interior octagon at the base.
- The dome above the horseshoe arch of the *mihrab* is linked to the square plan below using eight overlapping ribbed arches creating an octagon with arched windows, above ornamented squinches hidden in the corners of the square walls.
- These features combine to develop the style known as Moorish Islamic architecture.

- Post-*Reconquista* additions: The minaret has baroque additions and is now a Christian bell-tower; in the centre of the complex is a Renaissance Christian basilica now the cathedral.
- **Match the architectural terms to each of the images:** *mihrab*, *maqsura*, exterior tri-partite *qibla* wall, scalloped octagonal dome, hypostyle hall, overlapping horseshoe arches, Arabic calligraphy, plant designs in tesserae.

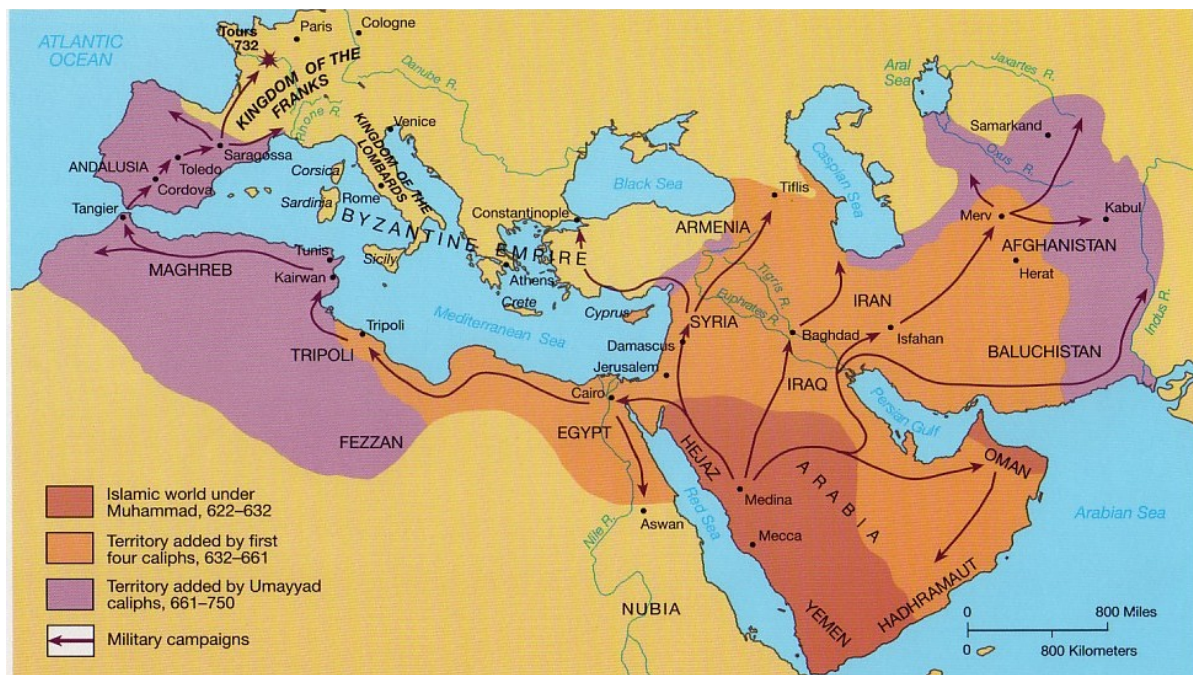




CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

The original site was a Roman temple to the god Janus. When Roman authority ended the Visigoth Christians dominated from c. 589 and a church was built. The Visigoths took over the whole Iberian Peninsula from the ancient Romans and used the horseshoe arch.

In the Arabian Peninsula the prophet Muhammed died in 632 CE and Islamic conquests spread across north Africa. The Umayyad dynasty of Sunni Moslems was established in Damascus in 634.



▲ The Spread of Islam

Muslim political rule in Spain began in 711 and the great mosque at Córdoba was built by Adb al-Rahman I, an Umayyad Prince who had fled from Damascus in Syria where the Abassids had overthrown the Umayyad dynasty. He established control over the Iberian Peninsula, and Islamic Iberia became known as Al-Andalus. He looked to recreate the grandeur of Damascus in his new capital, Córdoba from 756. Adb al-Rahman I was the Emir (military ruler) but he was not a caliph (major religious leader); he was not interested in conversion although 90% of the population were Muslim by C10th. The Visigoth Christian Kingdom was in decay and Adb al-Rahman brought administration, taxation, irrigation, and agriculture including the oranges in the mosque's courtyard. Located in the centre of a plain with a navigable river Córdoba was both safe and good for trade, with marble quarries, copper and tin mines. It was to become the largest city in western Europe with a population of 200,000.

Adb al-Rahman's model for the mosque in Cordoba was therefore the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus with its one minaret, and horseshoe arches (also known as the keyhole arch) as well as the hypostyle prayer hall from the mosque in Kariouan in Tunisia of 670 CE. Similar to other early mosques the structures pay homage to Roman structures such as aqueducts, and to the Byzantine squinch (and pendentive) to support the domes. The use of mosaics, especially in gold, to decorate the dome are also Byzantine in origin. The distinctive horseshoe arch soon became known as the Moorish arch and became a key feature of Moorish Islamic architecture in Spain which from the C12th was known as the Mudéjar style.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

The construction of the mosque uses building materials and techniques from a range of previous styles.

- Columns of the hypostyle hall are reused Roman (spolia) dark marble, granite and jasper columns with Corinthian capitals, cut down to 3m for this design
- Roman engineering skills of brick-built arches were known from the nearby aqueduct at Merida
- The double height arcades are made using innovative double-tiered horseshoe-arches, with a first arch springing from imposts above the Corinthian capitals and the second from the pier above the impost. These are made in an alternating pattern of red and white brick with stone voussoirs. The overall appearance is of a forest of columns
- The *mihrab* of mosaic, carved stone, stucco and marble was added in the C10th. It is surrounded by a frame decorated with Arabic Koranic verses in gold mosaic (gold leaf sandwiched between glass) with a red outline and blue surround.

- The best craftsmen would have travelled from Damascus and Jerusalem and although the name of the architect is unknown, masons' marks and signatures reveal Arabic to be their language.

WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

The original mosque built from 786-976 saw various extensions under each Emir. Cordoba remained the capital of the Umayyad kingdom until 1031 after which multiple rulers emerged. From 1088 the Berber Dynasties ruled from north Africa, and from 1238 when Nasrid rule was established the capital moved to Granada. During this period the Arab Empire had expanded from the Arabian Peninsula to Samarkand in the east and Andalusia in the west, north to the Pyrenees.

In 1236 when Cordoba fell to Christian forces the mosque was consecrated as a church. A new side chapel was built which changed the direction of prayer. New Christian images were added to the walls, but the Arabic writing remained as a local feature. *"The Christians who conquered Cordoba understood that there was much more power to be gained from appropriating this extraordinary metaphor of their conquest than from destroying it."* (Jerrilyn Dodds *Al-Andalus* 1992)

Muslim rule in Spain ended in 1492. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella supported Columbus in his exploration of the New World and officially suppressed both Islam (they knocked down the mosque in Grenada) and Judaism. They introduced the Inquisition during the Catholic Counter Reformation.

Today the interpretation of the building is directly linked to world politics. The archaeological investigations of the Visigoth church have allowed the authorities to view the site as essentially Christian with a brief Muslim interlude (as General Franco did). While other historians view Islam as foundational, and Moslems asked to use it for prayer in 2006 - a request denied by the Pope.

"Especially in Spain, the interpretation of the medieval Iberian past, with its intertwining threads of Christian, Muslim and Jewish culture, is a deeply political act." (D F Ruggles *The Stratigraphy of Forgetting: the great mosque of Córdoba and its contested legacy* 2011)

Further Reading

Ruggles, D.F. (2011) 'The Stratigraphy of Forgetting: The Great Mosque of Cordoba and its Contested Legacy' in: Silverman, H (eds) *Contested Cultural heritage*. Springer, New York

The mosque in the cathedral; Spanish identity politics' in *The Economist* October 10. 2015 Vol. 417 p. 54

Dodds, Jerrilyn 'Great Mosque of Cordoba' *Al Andulus: The Art of Islamic Spain* (1992) New York

Dr. Shadie Mirmobiny, "The Great Mosque of Cordoba," <https://smarthistory.org/the-great-mosque-of-cordoba>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Al-Andalus-The-Art-of-Islamic-Spain>

BBC Radio 4: *In Our Time* (2002) 'Muslim Spain' - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0054811>

PBS Documentary: *The Rise and Fall of Islamic Spain* <https://www.vimeo.com/96299022>

Short revision questions:

1. Which features show its religious identity as a mosque?
2. Which features show the influence of earlier Islamic structures? Which examples in particular?
3. How important was the location of the site for the architecture?