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Masterpiece

The Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba

Rorschach Religious Architecture



For some, it embodies the artistic creativity and religious tolerance of the Muslim period. For others, it is a symbol of the conquests and bloodshed that have washed over this region throughout the centuries. Photo: Sean Pavone / Alamy Stock Photo

by Christian C. Sahner

The mosque-cathedral of Córdoba in southern Spain is one of the great Rorschach tests of medieval architecture. Like the ink blots that psychologists use to divine unconscious thoughts, we tend to see in the building what we please. For some, it embodies the artistic creativity and religious tolerance of the Muslim period. For others, it is a symbol of the conquests and bloodshed that have washed over this region throughout the centuries. Whichever message we choose, the mosque is surely one of the most beautiful and controversial monuments in Europe today.

To understand the building's history, we must first understand the history of al-Andalus, the far western outpost of the medieval Islamic world. Prior to Muslim rule, this area was governed by the Catholic Visigoths. Under their watch, Córdoba was a relatively minor city, but this changed after 711, when the general Tariq ibn Ziyad led a relatively swift conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. Córdoba quickly became the capital of a new Muslim province ruled at a distance by the Umayyad caliphs of Damascus.

In 750, the Umayyads were deposed in a bloody rebellion, and a new caliphate was proclaimed in Iraq under the Abbasids. The revolutionaries hunted down and executed nearly all remaining Umayyad family members. One prince, however, Abd al-Rahman I, managed to escape, fleeing west to al-Andalus, where he established an independent dynasty that would endure in various forms until the 11th century. The Great Mosque of Córdoba was the centerpiece of Abd al-Rahman's new state. It announced his status as an autonomous sovereign in line with his illustrious ancestors in the East.

Historical sources claim that the Muslims of Córdoba initially worshipped alongside their Christian subjects in an existing Visigothic basilica, much like what happened in various Syrian cities after the conquest. This arrangement became increasingly untenable over time, and under Abd al-Rahman the church was demolished and a glistening imperial mosque was built atop its remains.

Over the centuries, the mosque of Córdoba underwent a series of expansions—in each case, to accommodate the swelling numbers of converts to Islam. Because of these, the mosque today can strike visitors as a vast, almost limitless space, like several football fields stuck together and covered by a low-hanging roof. Inside the prayer hall, columns plundered from Roman and Visigothic buildings support double arches in the shape of horseshoes, striped with bands of white and red. Along the southern wall stands the *maqsurá*, an enclosed sanctuary framing the *qibla* wall. This wall is adorned with mosaic inscriptions from the Quran and may have been installed by Christian craftsmen imported from Byzantium.

The other striking, even bizarre feature of the mosque is the Renaissance church planted in the middle of the prayer hall—a reminder that the building no longer serves as a place of Muslim worship, but as Córdoba's Catholic cathedral. In 1236, Christian forces conquered the city, and the mosque was promptly reconsecrated as a church. This process culminated in the 16th century with the installation of the Renaissance building, a light and airy space that provides a sensory

reprieve from the dark, slightly claustrophobic domains of the mosque. For early modern Spanish builders, the architectural contrast was deliberate and pointed at a still deeper theological contrast between the rival faiths. Still, it is telling that Córdoba's Christians left much of the mosque intact, including the Quranic inscriptions—a recognition, it seems, that a sense of beauty and majesty could transcend religious difference.

Herein lies the intrigue and paradox of the Mosque-Cathedral. For people around the world, Córdoba has become a symbol of an enlightened Islamic civilization that nurtured great artistic achievements and irenic relations among Muslims, Christians and Jews. The mosque, with its multilayered history, would seem to confirm this impression. At the same time, others have seen in Córdoba a darker story about how religions jostle for power and go to war. Indeed, by modern standards, Christians and Jews throughout al-Andalus were treated as second-class citizens and, as in other medieval polities, executions of heretics, blasphemers and apostates were not unheard of. The mosque—built over the wreckage of one church before it was scarred to make room for another—would seem to embody this message, too.

Today, the culture war over the mosque plays out in petitions by Muslim groups to use the building for prayer, requests that the Catholic diocese of Córdoba has so far refused. Between this and concerns about terrorism, the heavily armed security services at the complex are always on high alert. Given its complex identity, the mosque stands at the center of a fierce debate about what Islam meant for Spain in the past, and what it may mean for Europe in the future.

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