

Seville as Capital of the Almohad Empire in Al-Andalus

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Arabic Seville (Isbiliya); infrastructure; fortification; castle; mosque; markets; baths; houses; outskirts

Hispalis was under Muslim rule for five and a half centuries; its Arabic name was *Isbiliya*. This lengthy time can be divided into two periods, namely:

- 1) 711 or 712 (the Muslim Conquest) to 1147 (Almohad occupation)
- 2) 1147 to 1248 (Christian conquest)

These periods can be re-constructed thanks to the written sources, historiography, iconography and archaeological research. Little is known about the first period, as the written sources offer scarce information, and only a few remains are preserved. If we add to this the scarcity of archaeological research, it becomes clear that specific research is necessary in order to fill these gaps.

Isbiliya from 1147 to 1248

Both the chronicles and the evidence we have indicate that the Almohad caliphs were great builders. They constructed urban fortifications, places, water supply systems (aqueducts), bridges, docks, shipyards, mosques and castles; not only in the Magreb, but also in al-Andalus.

Isbiliya, as capital of the Almohads in al-Andalus, was converted into a metropolis. The city was completely transformed, especially between 1156 and 1199. Therefore, Seville would seem to be a good example of urban development in the High Middle Ages.

Thanks to the written sources, the formation of the metropolis can be described as follows:

The city

1. New urban fortification. Specific areas mentioned in chronicles were the riverside walls

(west side) and the Bab Yahwar wall (the connection between the city walls and the urban castle, or alcázar).

2. The construction of new enclosures around the pre-Almohad royal residence or alcázar, named alcazabas.

3. A new Friday mosque, built in a residential area to the south. A huge mosque of the dimensions of the one found in Córdoba.

4. The creation of a new bazaar area, reserved for luxury items (alcaicería). This is a group of streets, accessible only through four gates and closed at night.

The outskirts

1. Several bridges were constructed. A boat bridge on the Guadalquivir and stone bridges on the Tagarete, opposite the gates (puertas de Jérez, Carne, Carmona and Córdoba).

2. Royal summer residences, al-Buhayra and hisn al-Faray.

3. The re-construction of an abandoned aqueduct named *Caños de Carmona*.

The city

Urban fortification

The city walls seen today in Seville were constructed in the period between 1147 and 1248. As a consequence, very few remains of pre-Almohad walls are recognisable in the Alcázar area. The enclosure had a 7,000 metre perimeter, but no more than 2,000 metres can be seen nowadays. The 273 hectare surface of the city was much more than was necessary. Therefore, large spaces were devoted to orchards and gardens in the west, although some areas were still covered by pools. The

western area was claimed from the river, which, at this time, was really a polder. This was consolidated as a habitable area no sooner than the 15th century.

The following examples of the preserved fortification can be mentioned:

A) *Bab Yahwar wall* (located between the Yahwar gate and the urban caste, or alcázar).

B) Walls from the river side. This area was rebuilt twice in this period, firstly in 1168/1169 and secondly in 1201; on both occasions rebuilding was the consequence of a violent flood.

In 1998, an archaeological excavation opposite the Macarena gate showed the fore-mentioned walls with a 2-metre separation.

The most significant factor of this expansion to the north and west of the city walls was the conquest of a space which was commonly occupied by the river, as well as the beginning of a drainage process.

C) There were twelve gates, but only two are still preserved in their original style, namely the Córdoba gate and the postigo (postern) del Aceite. The former is a tower with an elbow entrance, while the latter is a gate flanked by two towers.

D) *Wall between Macarena and Córdoba gates.*
A 536 metre perimeter from serpentine city walls, formed by eight towers and two gates with an outer wall.

Two phases can be detected: the Almo had wall (1168/1169 or 1201) and the outer wall of 1220/1221. The wall, however, needed to be higher and three layers of adobe (2.4 metres in total) were added.

The urban castle (alcázar and alcazabas)

After the second half of the 12th century, the south of the city was consolidated as a political centre. To the enclosures built by the Omeyyads and Petty kings, the Almohads added many more, which are known as *alcazabas* in the written sources. These new enclosures had different functions, as garden, orchard, and cemetery, or as a fort (in the area opposite the river, because of their exceptional walls), and as industrial-state monopolies and residences. Archaeological research in this area has only been possible recently since 1997. It is now known that the pre-Almohad palaces were systematically demolished, and the new ones were built with a different orientation, parameters and aesthetics.

Common characteristics in Seville's fortifications are:

A. Building material. It was *tapial*, which is a mixture of pebbles in cement, sun-dried between wooden boards. Different kinds of soil can be discerned in such a log perimeter, and, consequently, different qualities of *tapial*. The wooden boards were 0.8 metres high and of variable length, with a maximum of 2.5 metres. Bricks were used in vaults and openings.

B. Typology. Towers were spaced out at regular intervals. Most of them are square, and only exceptionally do they have different forms, such as hexagons (torre de Abd al-Aziz), octagons (torre Blanca, torre de la Plata) and dodecagons (torre del Oro). Vaults are always the same: shaft, arris or groined. Another common feature is exterior decoration formed with a double line of bricks located in specific places, such as the chamber pavement or surrounding the arrow slits.

C. The Islamic walls survived as a city limit until the mid-19th century. A process of change and later decadence can clearly be seen. For example, after the Christian conquest, the Castilian kings demolished some of the Islamic palaces and created new ones. This is the case of the *palacio del caracol* (Alfonso X, from the second half of the 13th century) and the *palacio del Rey Don Pedro* (1364). The first transformation in urban fortification dates from

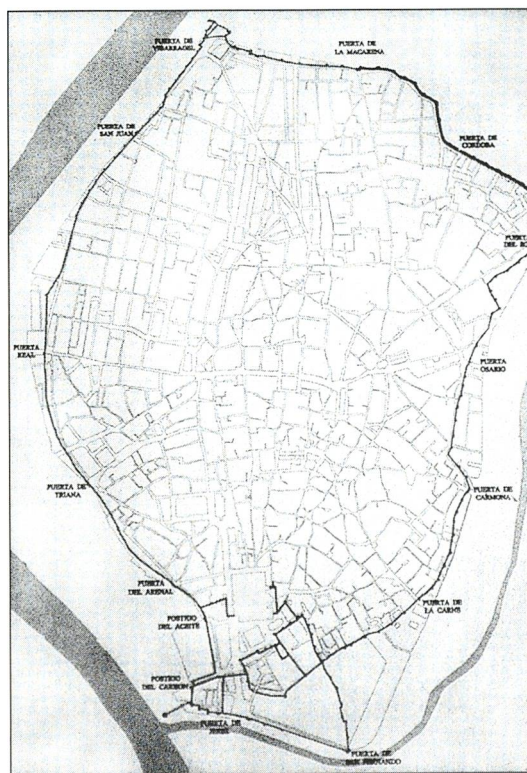
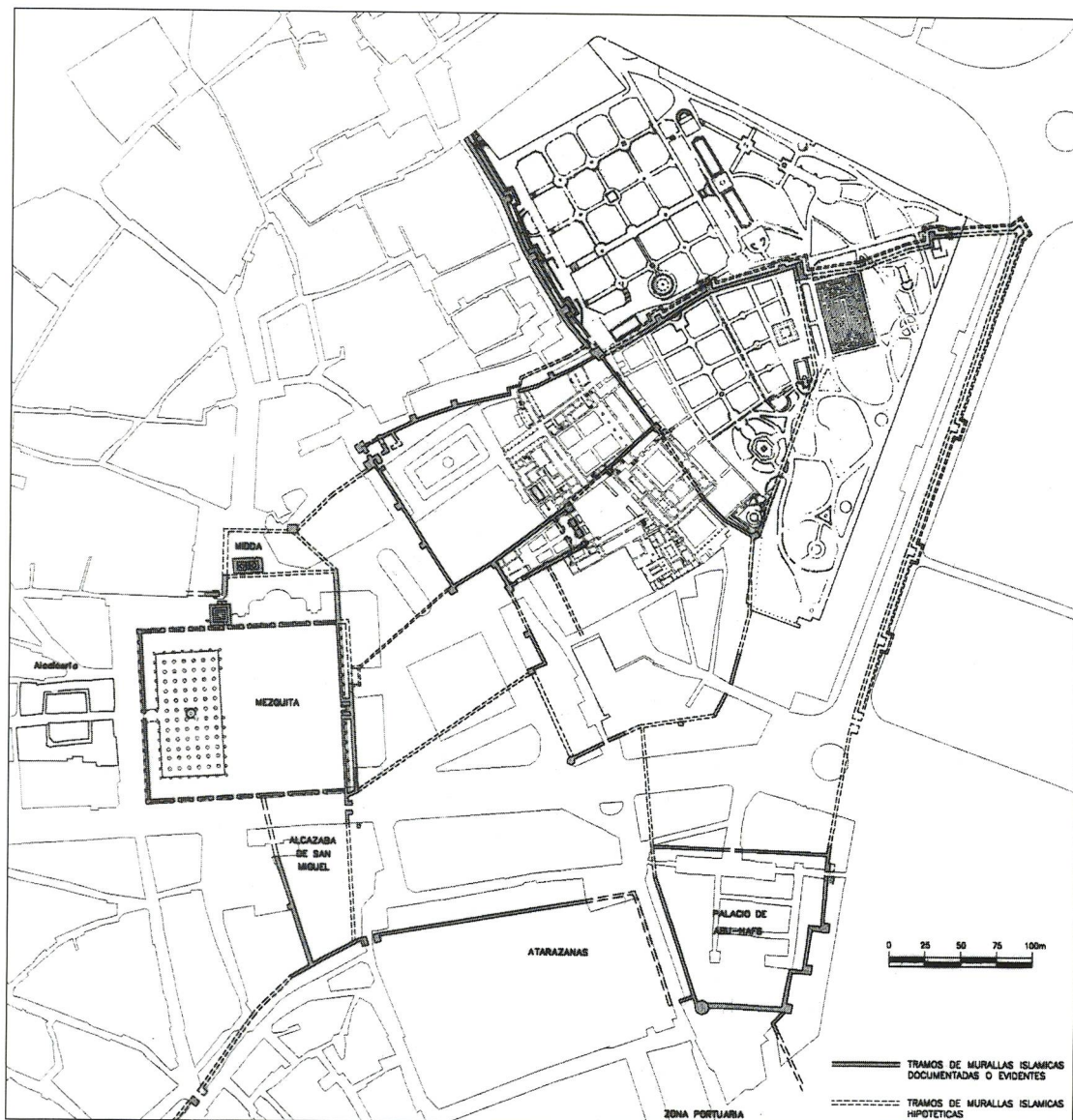


Fig. 1: Almohad city walls (M. Valor 1995).

Fig. 2: Friday mosque, alcázares and alcazabas (M. A. Tabales 1998).



the 16th century, when gates were built and widened to allow traffic to pass through. Also at this time the outer wall disappeared as houses were built over it. During the 18th century, maintenance of the wall was linked to flooding of the Guadalquivir. Only in the mid-19th century was the systematic demolishing of the Islamic enclosure begun, and only since the 1980s has the city council been developing a recuperation programme for this monument.

The Friday mosque

1172 is the date when caliph Abu Yaqub ordered his architect, Ahmad b. Baso, to construct this huge 8,231 square metre building. The first liturgy (*jutba*) to take place there was on April 30th, 1182. After Abu Yaqub's death in 1184, his successor continued the project

from 1188 onwards with a new architect called Ali Gomair. In this period, the courtyard (*sahn*) and the minaret were completed.

Today the *sahn* and the minaret are still partially preserved; the *haram* (oratory) is under the Gothic cathedral. The orientation of the mosque, following the convention in al-Andalus, was south-north. From 1984 onwards, several archaeological excavations have been carried out in the oratory and the courtyard, in addition to the restoration of the minaret. Also, in 1994, a wash-room was discovered opposite the minaret. This research, which is to be published forthwith, will provide the key to a definitive understanding of the building and its significance.

The most important feature is the radical aesthetic renovation that can be detected in this

building. The clearest example of this is the minaret with its brick decoration. This new style was to influence the following dynasties, not only in al-Andalus (Nasrids), but also in the Magreb (Merinis). Another aspect is the birth of monumental buildings; huge constructions in comparison with preceding architecture.

Markets, baths and houses

Nowadays, only one of the market structures founded by the Almohads can be seen. This is the case of the *Alcaicería* (market for luxury items) created opposite the main gate of the courtyard's Friday mosque. It was a 65 x 55 metre (3,575 square metre) area, formed by a principal axis (Hernando Colón Street), intersected by two narrower streets.

Preserved remains of five baths still exist, although only the 'hot' and 'warm' rooms survive. One of them, *Baños de la Reina Mora*, has been excavated several times since 1984. It dates back to Almohad times owing to its archaeological context and the architectural elements, namely capitels and brick decoration on vaults.

Concerning residences, some information is now known thanks to archaeological excavation. The city layout which still exists in the historic centre was formed during this period. Houses seemed to be very large, with courtyards used as gardens and orchards. Some of them were shaped like crosses, with pools or small-scale irrigation systems, including a well, waterwheel, irrigation channel and smallholdings. Rooms were on two sides, normally north and south, and they were very long with one small separation at the end (*alhanías*).

The building material tended to be re-used: stones, bricks and *tapial*. These walls were covered with plaster and frequently painted in dark-red (*almagra*) or mustard-yellow (*calamocha*). Pavements could be of dark-red earth, lime or bricks.

The outskirts

This aspect is still fairly unknown and has never been studied systematically. The outskirts of *Isbiliya* were re-organised at the same time as the *medina*, namely:

- In 1171 the caliph Abu Yaqub ordered the construction of a boat-bridge over the Guadalquivir river. At this period, several bridg-

- es over the Tagarete river were also built.
- One year later, the re-construction of a 17 kilometre long aqueduct was begun. Ten kilometres were underground, 5.3 kilometres were a canal and only the last 1.7 kilometres formed an architectural structure consisting of arches.
- Palaces built on the outskirts by the Almohad caliphs were known as *almunias*.

The two known cases are:

Al-Buhayra, constructed by Abu Yaqub in 1172, to the east of the *medina*. A large pool (43 x 43 metres) is preserved as the centre of an irrigation system. A huge orchard serving as a botanical garden was created there. The written sources indicate that the soil was changed, and the best fruit trees from the whole of al-Andalus were planted there. The only surviving Islamic building is a small pavilion (6.77 x 6.77 metres) to the south of the pool.

The case of *Hisn al-Faray* is completely different. This is a castle with an *alcázar* built on the boundaries of a high area called *Aljarafe* to the west of Seville. From this vantage point, the river Guadalquivir and the city are dominated. The castle is rectangular (550 x 250 metres) and built on a huge, partially artificial (man-made?) plat-

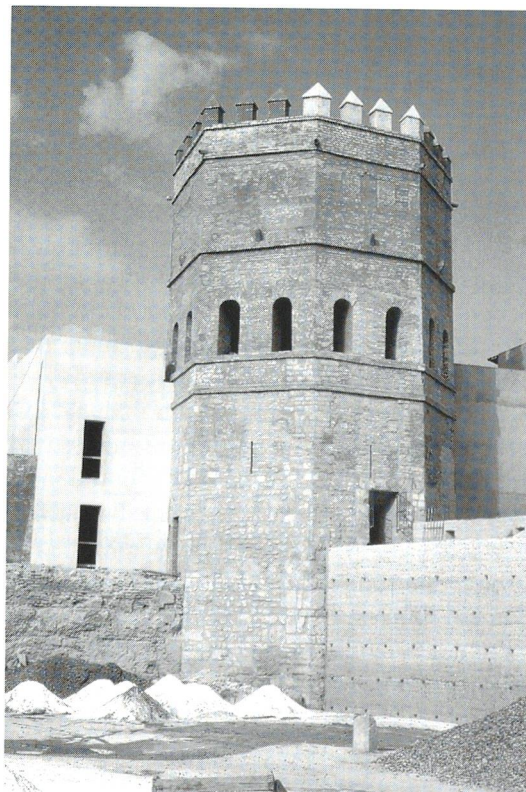


Fig. 3: The Silver tower (M. Valor 1991).

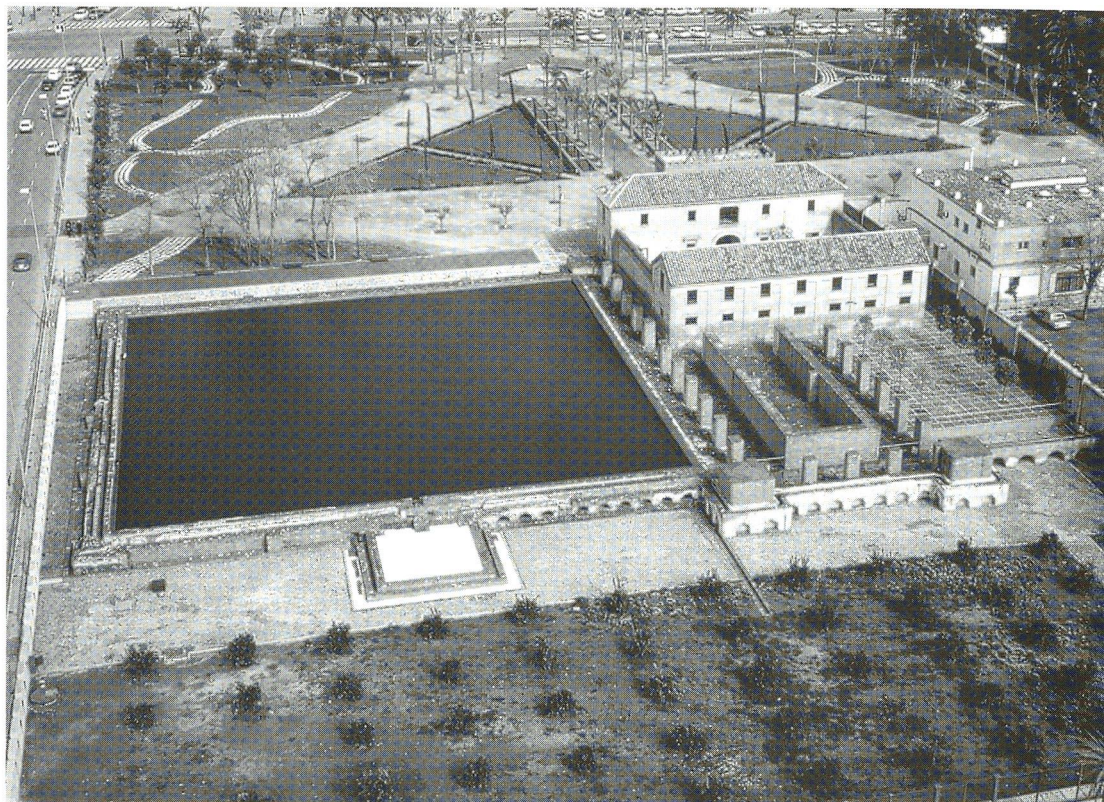


Fig. 4: Al. Buhayra orchard (C. Delgado 1998).

form, and its southern side is associated with gardens, an orchard and an irrigation system.

In addition to the above-mentioned features, mention can be made of the following:

- Dense orchards concentrated in the north in an area rich in subterranean water.
- The development of orchards in connection with the aqueduct channel, and also the construction of watermills.
- The existence of areas dedicated to pastures opposite the city walls. This was the case of the Prado de Santa Justa and the Prado de San Sebastián, both meadows on the eastern side, and, finally, a grassland called de-

hesa de Tablada to the south. These three pasture areas were a gift from King Fernando III to the city council of Seville after the Christian conquest.

- Three districts are known on the outskirts, namely Triana, Macarena and San Benialofar (nowadays San Bernardo).

The existence of towers 6.5 or 7 kilometres away from the city walls has been detected. This is the case (from north to south) of torre de Cuartos, Quiontos, Torreblanca, torre del Judío, Tercia, and one in the west (torre de Gambogaz, 1.5 kilometres in length). These towers probably define the municipality of Seville.

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