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Ruggles, D. Fairchild. Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain. Pp. xi, 272. ISBN: 0-217-01851-8.

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In a memorable scene early in the movie "Lawrence of Arabia" the beleaguered Prince Faisal and the newly-arrived Colonel Lawrence have a conversation that is, in a sense, all about the Arabs' legendary love of gardens. Faisal begins b} identifying Lawrence as being one of those odd "desert-loving English" (for him no sane Arab would love the desert but verdant and well- watered gardens instead) and ends with a poignant declaration of weariness with the war against the Turks that is at the same time a lament for the old glories of Islamic civilization. "I long for the vanished gardens of Cordoba," he says, an image that speaks to the special place occupied by the memory of al- Andalus in the hearts and minds of many Muslims, but no less to the centrality of gardens themselves in Islamic culture. Ruggles' splendidly full and broad-ranging new book is a fundamental resource on the complex of images evoked in Faisal's wonderful line, treating the gardens of al-Andalus in their historical and ideological contexts as well as in the more familiar architectural and botanical ones.

The book is cogently organized into three divisions by historical periods, a fundamental consideration

since 'Islamic Spain' in its various political configurations spans some seven centuries and thus vastly different historical conditions and styles. The first, entitled "Landscape", takes the reader from the relativelysbarren landscape encountered by the Berbers and Syrians who first entered the peninsula at the beginning of the eighth century to the prosperous and even lush land eventually created by the widespread irrigation practiced by the Muslims. Ruggles' always clear narrative interweaves all the fundamental threads of the historical and political events necessary to fully appreciate the cultural bases of everything that had to do with that dramatic transformation of the Iberian landscape. She seems as at home talking about the changing yields of crop harvests as about the variations in the concepts of paradise as a garden across different cultures and, as a result, in the two chapters that comprise this first section (entitled "History and Landscape" and "Botany and the Agricultural Revolution") she provides a sweeping picture of the 'natural' world that was so carefully engineered in al-Andalus during the first several centuries of Muslim rule.

Ruggles pays special attention to the wide range of texts--from calendars and botanical treatises to poetry--that speak to the landscapes, or to the plants newly introduced from other parts of the Islamic world, or to the evolving aesthetics of where buildings should be placed. Indeed, the richness of the textual landscape here makes what might otherwise be arid topics (for any but specialists in such things as agricultural techniques) into well-integrated bits and pieces of a full cultural picture, and a cultural picture that includes all sorts of vital things we rarely think of as part of 'culture' at all. And yet, as Ruggles says, directly sometimes, but mostly indirectly, can we really understand a poem that evokes a palm tree if we know so little about what a palm tree in the outskirts of Cordoba would have meant to a Syrian emigre there?

The second part of the book, its center, is called "Gardens and Architecture" and this encompasses four separate chapters that deal with aspects of that central motif. Although the first of these is devoted to more essential groundwork as per the whole of the first section (here architectural in the "Palaces and Estates of Cordoba, 711-936") the heart of the matter, to which both the subsequent chapters are devoted, is the legendary palatine city of Madinat al-Zahra, the ultimate "garden of Cordoba" in all the senses evoked by Alec Guiness' Faisal. Madinat al-Zahra, built by the Umayyad ruler who finally declared Cordoba the Caliphate of the Islamic world, was in its own time considered one of the wonders of the civilized world, and Ruggles gives a wonderful flavor of the wondrous nature of the place, from descriptions of the quicksilver pools to inventories of the number of columns sent as gifts to the Caliph (140 from the Byzantine emperor, for example). But, far more importantly, it was as a ruin that it eventually became the most evocative of the memory palaces of the Andalusians, evoked in everything from volumes of poetry to the gardens of the Alhambra, always the marker both of the extraordinary achievements of Umayyad Andalus and of its demise and unrecoverability. Ruggles' two chapters on this complex garden-city (which to this doy lies only very impartially excavated, something some might consider a scandal) do justice to the variety of riches there. And, once again, there are the detailed expositions of interest in and of themselves to specialists, but made intelligible and relevant to those who (I count myself among these) might otherwise pay scant attention to the elevations and orientations of buildings.

Once again, too, Ruggles understands unambiguously the extent to which the buildings were designed and built and lived in-- and eventually destroyed--by people in very specific historical circumstances, and she takes scrupulous care to make that history availabme to her readers, before she then goes on to cover the many aspects of the 'pre-history' and ideology that shaped the aesthetics of buildings and

gardens alike for the Cordobans of the tenth century. The complex picture she has been painting from the outset begins to crystallize here as she reveals the ways in which this palatine city on the outskirts of the Caliphal capital was a brilliant marriage of features from the best of Abbasid palaces in the East and the special irrigation and gardening techniques the Andalusians had been refining for over two hundred years. Within this joining of features from different strands of the Muslim world one of the crucial features was the establishment of interior as well as exterior "miradores" or the lines of sight and views, a subject treated here with the interdisciplinariness it deserves since it was of course both an architectural reality and an emblematic part of a cultural vision--one which would in some sense reach its apogee in the miradores of the Alhambra.

The Alhambra is itself the central subject of the final section, "The Garden Legacy" and although that is the best known by far of any of the other palaces she discusses, Ruggles places it in the "secondary" ("legacy") position vis a vis Madinat al-Zahra--and the power and achievement of the Umayyads of which it was a product and a symbol--in which it surely belongs, despite the vast and irremediable discrepancy in the surviving states of the two palatine cities. There is some irony, it has always seemed to me, that the gorgeous Alhambra, built by the embattled and often isolated Nasrids when Granada was the sole Islamic polity in the Iberian peninsula, has come to symbolize the Andalusian culture and history with which it has so belated a relationship. This has in some measure to do with that physical reality, what survived and what didn't, and that is itself part of the complex and often ironic vicissitudes of what was preserved from Islamic Spain: whereas Madinat al-Zahra was sacked (by Berbers, during what is sometimes called the Berber revolt, the civil wars that destroyed the Caliphate) and effectively turned into a ruin at the beginning of the eleventh century, the Alhambra was preserved (in great measure because the Catholic Monarchs declared it a "Casa Real" or Royal House).

But it of course also has to do with the lamentable tendency, even among different kinds of historians, to lump into a single category called "Islamic" (or, far worse, and still prevalent, "Moorish") everything in Spain from the Umayyad tenth century to the Taifa eleventh and the Nasrid fifteenth. Among the many virtues of Ruggles' understanding of the Alhambra is that it arises from the memory, if not the ashes, of those vanished gardens of Cordoba. It is, indeed, the vanished gardens of Madinat al-Zahra that are the heart and soul of the story told in this book and thus my single and probably cranky complaint about the book, thus, is that its lovely cover is a photograph of the Court of the Myrtles in the Alhambra--rather than of some part of the ruined Madinat al-Zahra, which in the book itself is the noble center. Fortunately, this book, at least, ought not be judged by its cover, and with or without the cover it should grace every library that has a place, no matter how limited, for the culture of Islamic Spain.