

An Umayyad column base and capital
Spain, Cordoba, Madinat al-Zahra
c. 960-976 CE / 348 - 365 AH



14 x 21 x 21 cm (base); 26 x 29 x 28.5 cm (capital); marble; damage to the tips of the acanthus leaves on the capital; damage on the top of the base; general surface abrasion on both objects

Inscription on the column base: *fa-tamma bi-'awn allah 'ala yaday [i]hsanihi ilayhi*

Provenance:

Capital - Private collection, Cordoba, acquired in the 1950s.

Base - Private Collection, Belgium

This capital and column base most likely originate in Madinat al-Zahra, a palace city complex located just outside of Cordoba. Although these two pieces do not belong to the same column, they both exhibit the decorative architectural characteristics of the Umayyad palace complex. While the capital is carved with one side unfinished, suggesting that it stood in front of a wall, the base is carved in the round as it was most likely free-standing. The capital takes the Classical shape of a fluted Corinthian capital with two rows of acanthus leaves; however, its surface decoration is distinctly different from Roman prototypes. It is carved with a lace-like ornament of stylised acanthus leaves, which is deeply drilled to create a unified pattern across the surface. The drill-work extends to the scrolls in the upper part of the capital, which are covered with a scrolling vegetal pattern. The upper and lower sections of the capital are divided by a bead and reel ornament. The column base has a square foundation decorated with a band of alternating trefoil designs. Above that, the rounded column base is carved with two bands of stylised waves, which frame an inscription in Arabic above a twisted rope motif. The inscription translates as: "It was completed with God's assistance, under the directorship of God's munificence [be granted] to him".

The formulas used in this inscription can be found on a capital from the hall of 'Abd al-Rahman III in Madinat al-Zahra. However, unlike that example, in our column base the name of the director of

the project is not included, and the ordering of the formulas is slightly different.¹ Both this and the differences in calligraphic style suggest that the column base originates from elsewhere in the complex. The more simplified style of carving and calligraphy relates closely to the base and head of a column also from Madinat al-Zahra but made during the reign of al-Hakam II and dated between 967-976 (fig. 1).² It is possible that the artisan who carved the inscription on our column copied it from earlier examples without fully understanding the text, which resulted in the slightly garbled order. Sheila Blair has pointed to mistakes in Umayyad carving on a column base in Madinat al-Zahra as well as in ivory boxes, demonstrating that this would not be an isolated example.³

The rich embellishment on the capital is also characteristic for capitals that were made during the for the Madinat al-Zahra. These densely decorated architectural sculptures would have been scored in the workshop but all of the detailed carving and drill-work would have been completed in situ. Analogous examples survive across several museums and private collections, including the Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, the Met Cloisters, and a superb capital in the Kuwait National Museum (figs. 2 – 3). Just as the bases, the capitals vary in quality and size, depending on the significance of their placement within the city complex of Madinat al-Zahra.

Madinat al-Zahra, which translates as ‘shining city’, was the vast palace-city complex built by the Spanish Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III as his capital of al-Andalus, located to the west of Cordoba. Further extensions to the palace were made by his son and successor al-Hakam II (r. 961-976), and our sculptures can be dated to this reign. The palace complex was built as a symbol of Umayyad power on the Iberian Peninsula, displaying influences from Syria, as well as local traditions and Roman survivals. Its artistic and architectural heritage represents the culmination of luxury and culture in early medieval Europe. However, its status was short-lived, and the complex fell into disuse after the death of al-Hakam II. It was sacked in 1010 in the political turmoil that engulfed al-Andalus in the so-called Ta'ifa Period (1009-1106).

Today, the city survives only as an archaeological site (fig. 4) but we get a glimpse of the richness of this lost city from these surviving architectural fragments that showcase virtuoso carving and the visionary agenda for the city. These remnants of Madinat al-Zahra stand as a testament to an era of strong Islamic influence that was the basis for the subsequent flowering of art in medieval Spain.

Literature

- Jenkins, Marilyn. *Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum. The al-Sabah Collection*. London, 1983.
Rosser-Owen, Mariam. *Islamic Arts from Spain*. V&A Publishing: London, 2010.
Dodds, Jerrilynn D. *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*. MET: New York, 1992.

¹ *Madinat al-Zahra, El Salon de 'Abd al-Rahman III*, Cordoba, 1995.

² *Les Andalouses de Damas a Cordoue*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 2001, nos. 78a-b, p. 107

³ Sheila Blair, "What the Inscriptions Tell Us: Text and Message on the Ivories from al-Andalus", in *Journal of the David Collection*, Volume 2,1 (pp. 78-79 & fig. 42).



Fig. 1
Column Base from Madinat
al-Zahra
Spain, Madinat al-Zahra
c. 967-976
Archaeological Museum,
Cordoba



Fig. 2
Capital
Spain, Madinat al-Zahra
c. 960
The Cloisters 25.120.509



Fig. 3
Capital
Spain, Madinat al-Zahra
972 – 73
Kuwait National Museum

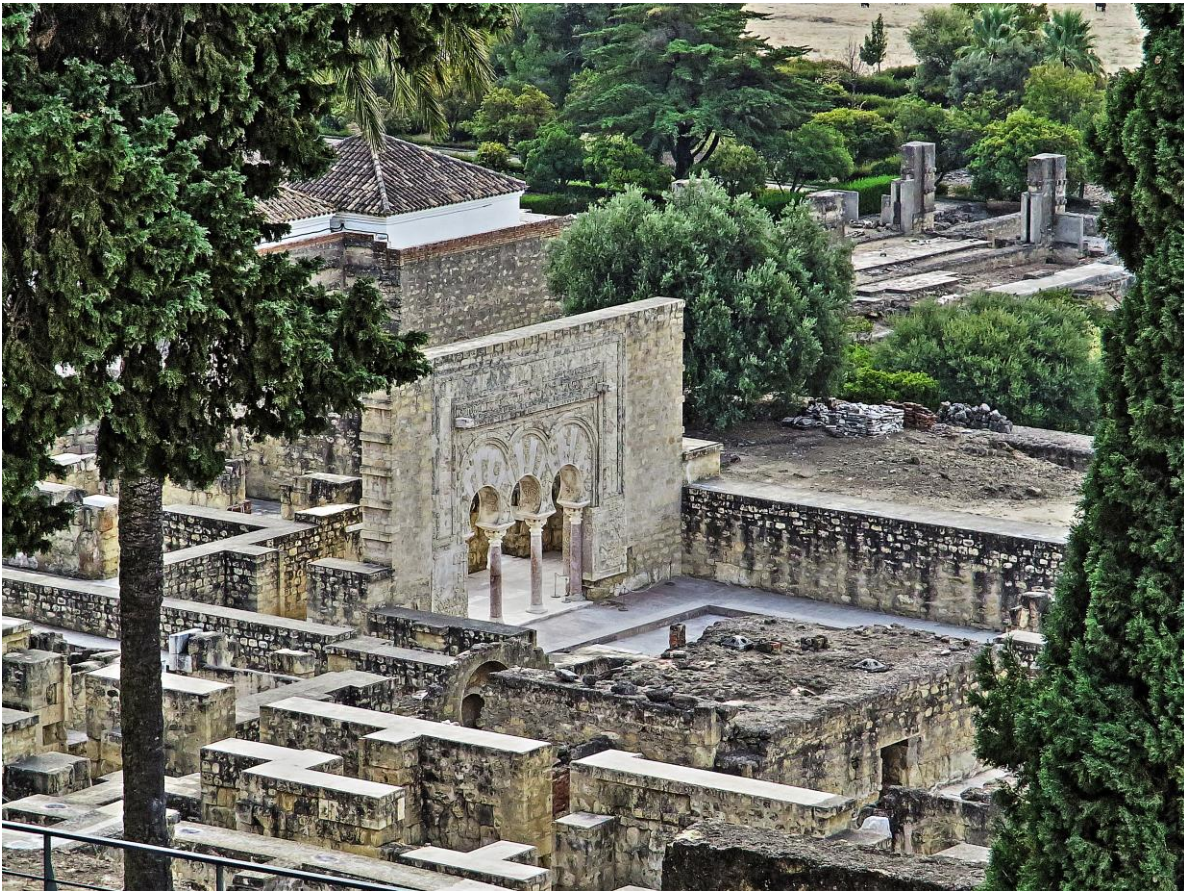


Fig. 4
Madinat al-Zahra site, Spain
10th century