

2. The Light of Andalucía – The Poetry of Jarchas

The ruins of Medina Azahara, located in the suburb of Córdoba in Andalucía, were a palace built in the 10th century for Queen Azahara by Abderramán III (929-961) using his enormous wealth. The magnificent site surrounded by almond trees reminds us of the prosperity of Andalucía under Islamic rule.

At that time, there were some Christians who continued to speak a Romance language¹ under the rule of the Moslems whose language was Arabic. The language of those people, called Mozárabe, had older forms than the Castilian (castellano) language. There are only a few scarce references to help us learn about this language, and they are only found in the terms used in ordinances, names of places and botanical names.²

However, it was recently discovered that the lyric poems buried in the old Arabic documents were in fact written in spoken Spanish of that time.³ They are short poems of ladies' love songs⁴ called jarcha (kharja خَرَجَ in Arabic), added at the end of Arabic long poems, moaxaja (muwashshah مُوشَّح).

It is said that the poet Muqaddam ibn Muafa or Muhammad ibn Hammud in Cabra, the city near Córdoba, created the poetic form of moaxaja including jarchas in the age of Abderramán 3rd, the builder of Medina Azahara.

¹ Languages derived from colloquial Latin are called “romance”. It is the original form of today's Romance languages (lenguas románicas) such as Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian and Romanian etc.

² Galmés de Fuentes (1983).

³ Watt states that jarchas “can be characterized as a folklore, and were probably sung by the native female performers in front of the Arabic speaking audience (Japanese transl. by Kuroda, p153). However, it is also assumed that jarchas were the language of the mozarabe (the subordinates) reproduced by the Arabian or Hebrew poets from the rulers' standpoint (cf. Gorton, 1982). If this is true, we must consider the Spanish in jarchas as a reflection of mozarabe's language and not itself.

⁴ Coming after the regular Arabic poems, it is easy, even after centuries, to imagine how much impact those brilliant love-poems sung in the popular Romance language had. cf. P. Dronke (1996), especially chapter 3.