

1. INTRODUCTION: AN APPROACH TO ABANDONED SETTLEMENT RESEARCH IN CUATROVITAS AND AL-ANDALUS

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The “*alcaria de Cotrovita*”, the village of Cotrovita,⁶ appears today just with a religious building in the form of a hermitage chapel, which at its core dates back to the Almohad period. Despite the long phases of Christian domination that have left their imprint, three parts of the building: the prayer hall, the courtyard, and the minaret, are preserved with large and important shares of their historic Islamic fabric. This internal ensemble of large parts of the building makes Cuatrovitas a unique example of a remaining rural mosque compared to other rural prayer rooms on the Iberian Peninsula, which have only been fragmentarily preserved (see the list in chapter 7 p. 172).

While the building looks well-maintained at first glance and is still in use today, the associated medieval settlement has been abandoned for centuries. The extensive area around the chapel calls for research in many cultural-historical aspects. While natural conditions and increasing destruction by intensive monoculture olive farming have affected the preservation of the settlement remains, this contrasts with a lively and publicly acknowledged feeling for local history, anchored in the collective consciousness of inhabitants of the region through pilgrimage and lore. Attempts have already started to bridge this divide. They encompass a widening of the archaeological zones to include the former settlement area as well as the preservation of the immaterial heritage of what is in fact the oldest Marian pilgrimage in Andalusia, going back as far as 1595. Parallel to this, there are also signs of a drive towards marketing and emphasis on solely folkloristic points.

Scholarly research on the site began relatively late, although there is ample evidence for a general interest in the building. There is a set of photographic plates from the Real Academia de Fotografía, which were made at the end of the 1920s for the monuments inventory of the province of Andalusia. They are of great value for current research. Hardly any other photographic images older than the 2nd half of the

20th century are known. Manuel Gómez-Moreno, the founding father of Islamic archaeology on the Iberian Peninsula, mentioned the building with its emblematic minaret in 1927, without further discussion.⁷ Leopoldo Torres Balbás followed this tradition in 1941 with a short introductory presentation.⁸

During major renovations in the 1940s, a rough on-site measurement of the chapel (idealized ground plan and longitudinal section at a scale of 1:100) was produced by the architect Felix Hernández Jiménez. He complemented his documentation with just one photo of the exterior from the east, when the restoration of the damaged minaret was finished (fig. 250).⁹ He evidently did not make any major modifications to the historical fabric.

In contrast, the restoration work directed by Rafael Manzano (1971–1973) caused an intentional but uncontrolled loss of original structures. Not only was “re-Islamization work” carried out at many points of the building, but Manzano was also interested in resolving questions about the foundations of the mihrab, the minaret and other structures by excavations. The point was not to work according to archaeological standards or to produce a documentation in drawing and photography.¹⁰ Only a set of blurred black-and-white snapshots in 35 mm can give some vague impressions about the dimensions and the localization of these modern interventions and Islamic-styled additions. Again, a significant loss of original layers was produced by the latest renovations under Ricardo Aláreo López in 2005. No scientific documentation was carried out before or during the removal of the historical plasters from the extant walls and when the historical brick floor was replaced. More recently, a highly valuable architectural analysis of the surviving minaret tower with its typical Almohad façade structure by Pedro Gurriarán Daza limits itself to one single architectural element of the ensemble.¹¹

There were few scholars to formulate questions about the site or the area during the 20th century. If we compare this to

6 Older settlement names have not verifiably survived; only “Boyana” is uncritically mentioned (Rivas Rivas – Álvarez-Ossorio Rivas 2006, 37). – According to Celan 1983 the fraternity historian Hilario Areanas traced the village name to a corrupted Arabic name for the minaret “Al-borg, kur roh al-bitza” (Arabic: “The minaret of the little house, for spiritual uplifting”). Current research results on the toponym are explained in detail in chapter 4.3.

7 Gómez-Moreno 1927, 131.

8 Torres Balba 1941.

9 As an architect and archaeologist, he was the leading construction manager in the middle of the 20th century for all major reconstruction of Islamic period monuments of national importance.

10 Personal communication by Rafael Manzano, 22nd Nov. 2015.

11 Gurriarán Daza 2000.

the number of investigations in the wider area of al-Andalus, the lack of archaeological research in the hinterland of the Almohad capital city Seville becomes obvious. So far, the so-called El Aljarafe has not been included in historical-archaeological projects. Extant structures from the Islamic period (see chapter 4.1) were partly investigated and renovated by different municipalities, but have in some cases fallen into disregard and neglect, as they were hardly included in cultural activities, theme paths or similar information services. For settlement archaeology, the situation has become more urgent during recent years, since an intensive monocultural agriculture with the use of heavy machinery – as we observed in the olive groves near our site – is a destructive factor which makes it increasingly difficult to identify remnants of abandoned settlement sites, not to mention problems of conservation. New forms of tillage and cultivation have clearly aggravated the preservation of underground structures since the 1970s.

Apart from archaeological research, historians have so far produced a few short contributions dealing with questions on historical sources, on the historical structures of El Aljarafe and its importance for the history of the Almohad period. Studies have rarely referred to the site of Cuatrovitas, as the place is obviously not mentioned in preserved sources.¹²

Only the *Repartimiento de Sevilla* from 1253 allows us today to connect extant buildings, settlements or archaeological sites to their written mentions (see chapters 4.2 and 6.2). This extremely important research work has been undertaken by Magdalena Valor.¹³ The catalogue-like description of landed property offers a good starting point to identify an archaeological site, in this case Cuatrovitas, with a concrete historical district administration. The close relationship between this source and archaeological research offers a perspective for further research with a large-scale approach, which has the potential to illuminate still unknown chapters of the settlement history of the hinterland of Seville.¹⁴

West of this region, individual Early Medieval (rural) settlement structures have been researched thanks to Portuguese and French initiatives and published in important overviews. Built structures of the Islamic period are described or at least mentioned in these publications.¹⁵ Especially noteworthy is

the research done over decades by international teams in Saltés near Huelva, a *madīna* that was settled during the Almohad period. This site has been sporadically examined since 1945, and was thoroughly researched in 1988–2001.¹⁶ The excavated Almohad domestic structures of the town of Saltés were key to understanding and interpreting the conditions in Cuatrovitas.

Even more intensively than in Spain, the upsurge in medieval and Islamic archaeology in neighbouring Portugal in the last two decades, with the help of international cooperation, has resulted in a number of larger and smaller archaeological projects. First and foremost among these have been Mértola (Alentejo)¹⁷ and Silves (Algarve),¹⁸ which yielded rich material especially on the Almohad period. Both places clearly show features of urban culture, due to their political position as respective centres of small kingdoms. In contrast, archaeological projects aimed at rural settlements have been the exception in modern Portugal. If we turn our attention to other areas on the Iberian Peninsula that were once under Islamic control, a similar picture emerges. To date, there are few publications presenting archaeological research or surveys on a broad basis on related rural settlement structures. The investigated sites lie far apart from each other and have few similarities.

In this context, the fortified hillside settlement of Siyasa near Cieza (Murcia province), dating to the 12th–13th century has to be mentioned. It has been significantly investigated by Julio Navarro Palazón and Pedro Jiménez Castillo, and has become significant to research due to the meticulous excavation of the splendid private houses of a town quarter, decorated with stucco and rich in finds.¹⁹ Some of these houses have also been reconstructed in the museum. Almost the whole of the fortified inner city on the hillside with its crowning fortress (*hishn*) has been subject to measuring surveys and magnetometer prospection, from which a ground plan was made, while suburban settlements and a necropolis were documented in a more selective manner. The Islamic settlement lasted until the second quarter of the 13th century; it was partly continued after the Christian conquest by a few Christian families until the end of that century, when other parts had already been abandoned.²⁰ Another archaeologically explored deserted village in a far distance from Cuatrovitas is Villa Vieja at the hill on top of Calasparra (Prov. Murcia), apparently with good parallels to Siyasa.²¹

The small settlement accompanying the Torre Bufilla (Bétera, Valencia) has also survived as an abandoned village. It originated in the 11th century under the protection of a watchtower, part of the outer fortification line of Valencia

12 Valor Piechotta et al. 2002; Valor Piechotta 2003; Valor Piechotta – Ramírez del Río 2004b. See also chapter 4.3.

13 Valor Piechotta 2003.

14 During an international meeting in 2003 in nearby Benacazón, organized by Spanish and Moroccan participants, this perspective was apparently taken. It concerned the farmsteads and villages of the Aljarafe, the history, archaeology, architecture and environment. Unfortunately, it was impossible to get hold of the publication presented in Morocco (Aitoutouhen Tamsamani 2007) despite our best efforts.

15 Bazzana 1992; Guichard – van Staavel 1995, 51; Bazzana 2002; Catarino 2002; also a somewhat older Spanish publication: González Jiménez 1980.

16 Bazzana – Bedia García 2005.

17 Among others Gómez Martínez 2006; Gómez Martínez et al 2009.

18 Among others Gonçalves 2009; Gonçalves n.d.

19 Navarro Palazón – Jiménez Castillo 2007.

20 Navarro Palazón – Jiménez Castillo 2007, 71–73.

21 Pozo Martínez 1989.

that was established at this time.²² A few streets with plain single-storey houses and a complex of public baths were excavated here.

On the present border with Portugal, some 56 km west of Badajoz, the remains of the deserted town of Cuncos (province of Extremadura) were at least partly researched in a rescue excavation financed by the two neighbouring countries. The town was probably already deserted when it was first mentioned in 1295/1298. Situated on an elevation of 140 m above sea level and measuring 180 m × 100 m within its fortified walls, it was probably founded strategically to guard the local ford across the Guadiana river. The excavation suffered from time pressure before the area was flooded for the large Alqueva reservoir. Apart from the preliminary report containing the ground plan of the town,²³ ceramic finds²⁴ were also published.

In nearby Albalat (province of Extremadura), research by Sophie Gilotte has uncovered the structures of Madīnat al-Balāṭ, a 2.5 hectares large rural place of the Islamic period.²⁵ The settlement had a surrounding wall which followed the terrain, partially still extant to 8.35 m height, and containing erratically placed square towers. These are mostly placed facing the river and did not serve also as abutments. Their construction revealed several phases ranging from slate quarrystones to a last wall-strengthening expansion with rammed clay. The settlement, which must have existed at least from the second half of the 10th century onwards, is mentioned in sources as either *madīna* (town) or even *iqḷīm* (district main town), particularly in the context of the many conquest struggles of the Castilian troops up to the mid-12th century. Its abandonment during the Almoravid period, as determined by archaeological evidence, was brought about by force and proved to be irrevocable. Apart from a number of houses built of rubble (local shale and limestone) with generous amounts of clay and entire streets in a systematic layout, two metalworking shops and a storage building were identified. The zone of the mosque has not yet been found. Outside the fortified town, a cemetery and the bathhouse (*ḥammām*) formed a sort of unfortified suburbia.

A commendable compilation of the Almohad period history in terms of structure and organizational forms was lately done for the territory around Lorca (province of Murcia).²⁶ Isolated archaeological features are also broadly considered.

For the even wider context, research initiatives on the archaeology of the Berber dynasties in Morocco need to be mentioned. Abdallah Fili has to be named as one of the archaeologists who have applied modern methods of fieldwork in the Almoravid capital of Aḡmāt,²⁷ the hilltop fortress Ġīlīz belonging to the Almohad founder Ibn Tūmart,²⁸ and in Ribāṭ of Tīt.²⁹ Some of this research has been done in cooperation with Jean-Pierre van Staëvel. In the *madīna* of Tīt, a small minaret has been documented, which corresponds best to the Cuatrovitas example in size and building technique (see fig. 258. 259).

22 López Elum 1994; Mileto et al 2011.

23 Valdés Fernández 2002; Valdés Fernández 2004.

24 Graf 2008; Graf 2010; Cuncos was first mentioned in 1295, during Christian times, and similarly to Cuatrovitas the Arabic name is unknown.

25 Gilotte et al. 2013; Gilotte 2014a; Gilotte 2014b; a similar topographical situation can be found in the comparable La Viletta de Azuquén, which has not yet been researched, see Gilotte 2001; also the similar position and extent of the small deserted town Alija (near Peraleda de San Román, prov. of Toledo), see Gilotte 2010, esp. 131–134.

26 Martínez Rodríguez 2013.

27 Foundation Aghmat 2013; Fili 2014; Héritier-Salama et al. 2016.

28 Saleh Ettahiri et al. 2013; van Staëvel et al. 2014.

29 Bassett – Terrasse 1927; recently: van Staëvel et al. 2017; (non vidi) C. Masure, Nouvelles recherches archéologiques sur le ribāṭ de Tīt (Maroc). Les matériaux et techniques de construction, Mémoire inédit sous la direction de Jean-Pierre van Staëvel (Paris 2012–14).