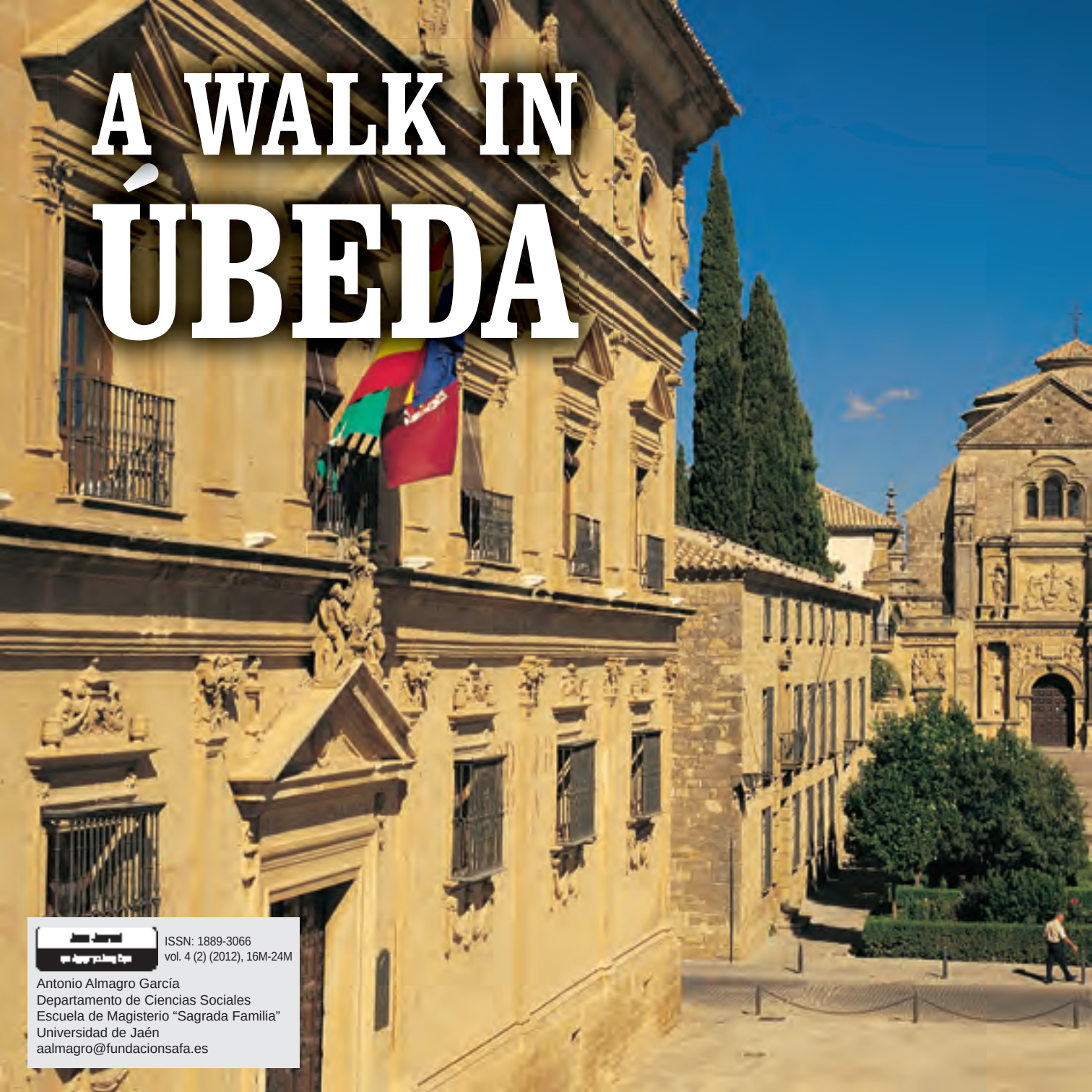
# A WALK IN ÚBEDA



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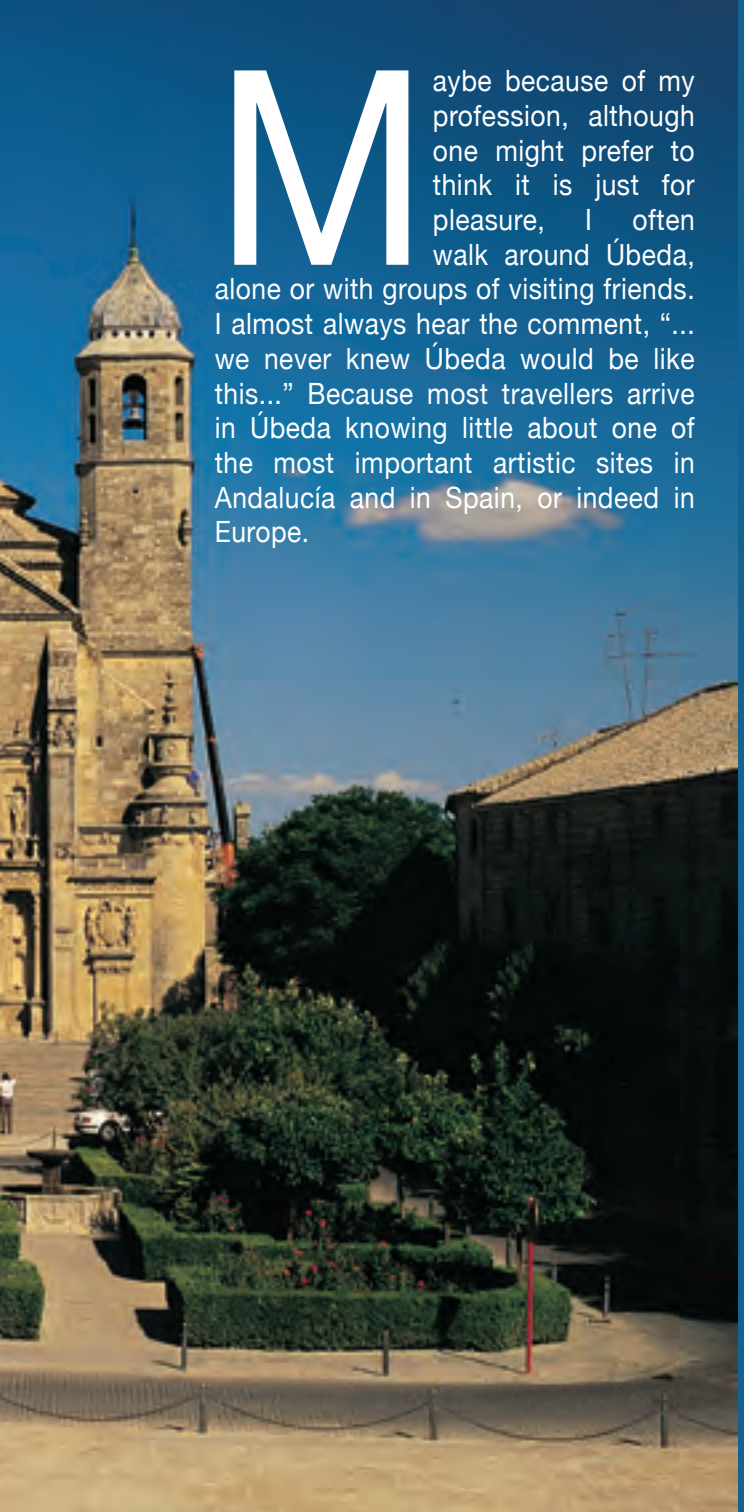


Maybe because of my profession, although one might prefer to think it is just for pleasure, I often walk around Úbeda, alone or with groups of visiting friends. I almost always hear the comment, "... we never knew Úbeda would be like this..." Because most travellers arrive in Úbeda knowing little about one of the most important artistic sites in Andalucía and in Spain, or indeed in Europe.

Eugenio D'ors captured this impression better than anyone. In his words:

*"There are few cities in Spain which taken as a whole, can be categorised as beautiful. There is a multitude of cities that contain outstanding beauty, and guard it like a treasure to be defended or an exquisite appearance. Here nobody will be unaware of or deny the glory of Toledo, or Seville. But they are not like Venice, where despite the best efforts of vandalism and clumsiness, the loveliness of the city resists and devours and assimilates the most outrageous attacks, made as it is almost entirely of delicate water and light, iridescence and reflections. In Toledo, in Seville, a utilitarian demolition or a ham-fisted building programme can cause irreparable damage.*

*Salamanca, yes. The urban beauty of Salamanca withstands the rigours of the sun unabated and undiminished. It becomes vaporous and shines through them. Under a pearly canopy of clouds and in a smaller area, so does that of Santiago... And this other, which I want to celebrate today, more modest, but not more humble - that is, less favoured by fame than assisted by merit - but equally perfect. And beyond the coyness of, for example, Despeñaperros, this is what the demure Úbeda has."*

Travellers arriving at Úbeda, who most often have heard of it from the expression “going by the hills of Úbeda” (beating about the bush), are surprised, amazed, interested and thrilled, and find it quite unlike any preconceived idea they might have of an Andalusian city. Úbeda is a unique city with a marked architectural quality; it is the product of a long historical process which has given it its character, and the heir to a historic and artistic site of more than 90 hectares which describes a complex reality, not just in its size but in its quality.

Islamic in its origins, the city would acquire all the features typical of Islamic town planning: a city wall, gates, a medina, winding streets, few open spaces, defined neighbourhoods… In the words of Chueca Goitia, *“a private, hermetic and sacred nature which gives this type of city another note which we could express with the word secret...”*

Might the product of this “secret” be the adjective “demure” used by Eugenio D’ors? What is certain is that as late as the 19th century, the city, in the words of Madoz, still had a Moorish appearance: *“...The whole town is in the Arab manner. Its structure, its winding streets, the order of its buildings and the narrowness and irregularity of the places, showing elegance and comfort wherever it can...”*

Of Muslim Úbeda, which must have been configured around a strongly walled centre, consisting of a medina (with its grand mosque and a covered market) and a series of neighbourhoods, some parts of the walls and gates are still extant, as well as an urban layout revealing quite a few characteristics typical of Islamic town planning.

The Reconquest would not bring much change to the urban layout, although it would to the legal, political, social and cultural aspects and the use of the territory, which would make Úbeda an upper-class town. Large farming estates arose, and as a consequence, there was more investment in building, which would gradually change the city according to the new ideas on social prestige and the sense of reputation so characteristic of the Renaissance.

The main changes came from the conversion of the former mosques to parish churches, becoming legal and religious institutions which divided the city into eleven different parts, mostly coinciding with the neighbourhoods; the construction of numerous palaces and mansions; and convents and other public and private buildings. But change also came from the increasing population, expanding the city, beginning with the large areas between the walls to the north and east.

Few changes affected the architectural aspects of the city in the 17th and 18th centuries. Baroque town planning did not alter Úbeda.

The later 19th century did, however. The appearance of the city changed, widening what are now the main thoroughfares, modernising, and as Pi y Margall noted *"...the bourgeois city can now be seen, where the once isolated and silent palaces of the aristocracy live among the bustle of traffic and industry."*

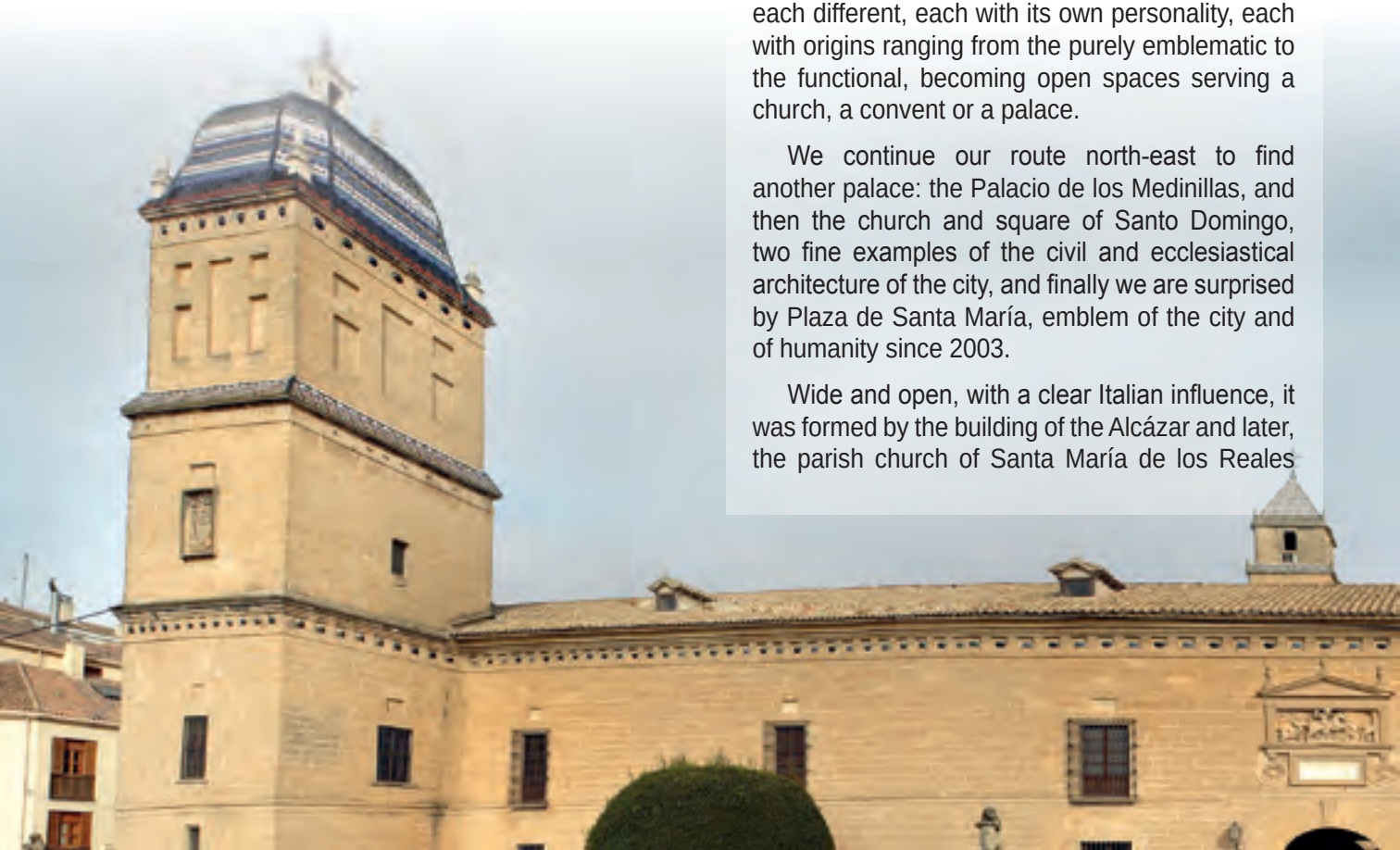
This is the setting, these are the streets to walk through, but if it is difficult to define a street, it is much more so in historic cities which have grown up over centuries. Juan Pasquau, in his evocative *Biography of Úbeda*, said that in Úbeda *"...there are redundant streets, useless streets which make the journey longer rather than shorter; streets which change their minds, which turn around halfway along, when they have reconsidered... And others which become wider and decide to be squares, when you least expect it; or which become impossibly narrow, annoying both logic and the logical."*

Let's suppose that from Plaza de Andalucía (where historically, illustrious visitors were received) we go down the Rastro and the Cava to see some of the wall, and we come to Casa de las Torres. Already, we see some of the constants of Úbeda: palaces (as befits its nickname of the city of a hundred churches and a thousand palaces), squares, and the Renaissance. Úbeda is a city of palaces and a city of squares, but above all, it is a city of the Renaissance. Casa de las Torres, built in 1520, is the oldest and most Castilian of the Plateresque in Úbeda, the transition to a new lordly and urban architecture which does not forget the habits of war. Its name comes from the towers flanking it, and it was the home of Andrés Dávalos, Commander of Santiago and Alderman of Úbeda. The façade, although not the later courtyard, assembles a catalogue of decorative motifs: medallions, shields, mermaids, dragons, etc., expressing, more than an architectural style (architecture is space) a decorative style, presented here in all its splendour in a magnificent curtain wall which tells us nothing of the internal spaces of the building.

Here it is obligatory to mention the church of San Lorenzo to our right, with its charming bell tower presiding one of the most evocative squares in the city. As we said before, Úbeda is a city of squares, each different, each with its own personality, each with origins ranging from the purely emblematic to the functional, becoming open spaces serving a church, a convent or a palace.

We continue our route north-east to find another palace: the Palacio de los Medinillas, and then the church and square of Santo Domingo, two fine examples of the civil and ecclesiastical architecture of the city, and finally we are surprised by Plaza de Santa María, emblem of the city and of humanity since 2003.

Wide and open, with a clear Italian influence, it was formed by the building of the Alcázar and later, the parish church of Santa María de los Reales

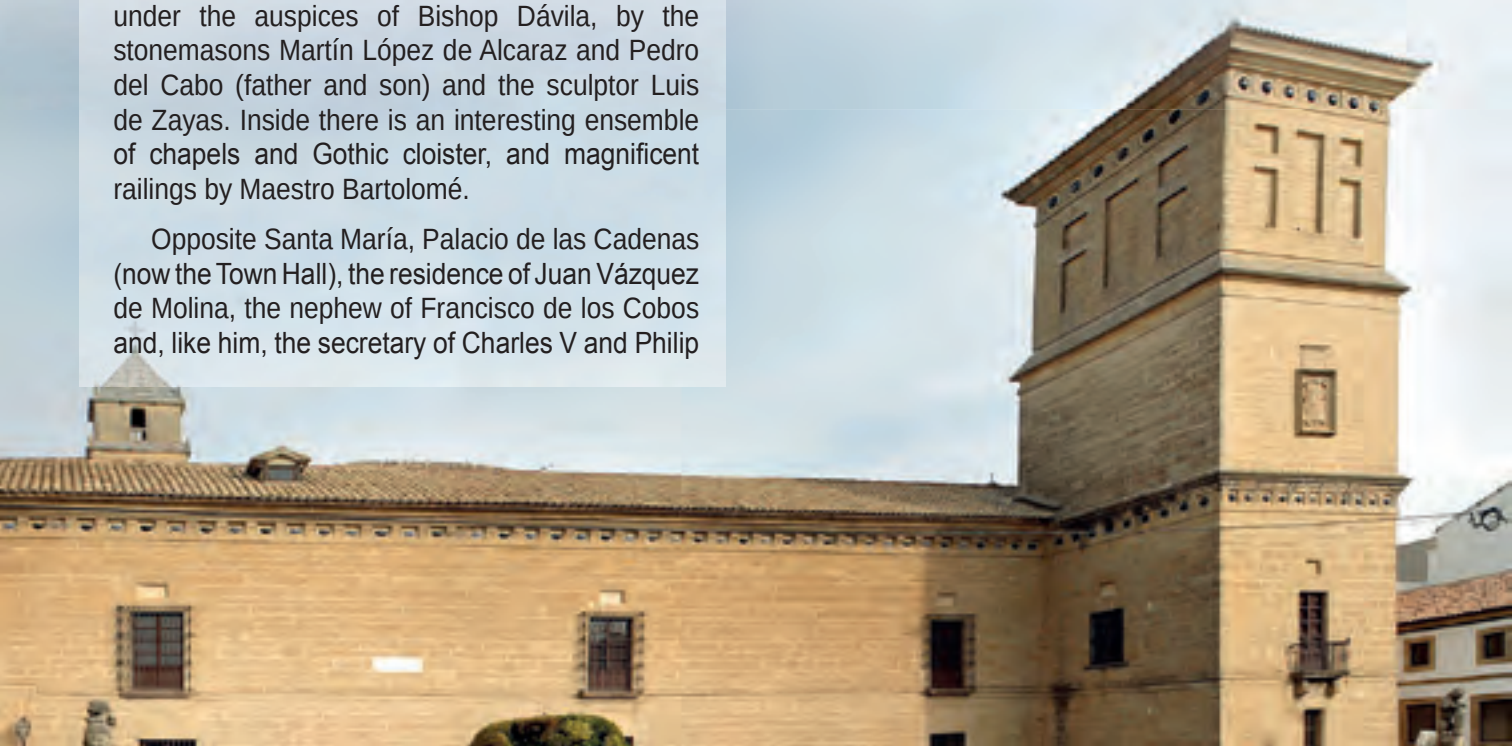


Alcázares. Based on these, the present buildings were raised in the vast space, following three fundamental axes. The main axis is determined by the Sacra Capilla del Salvador with the palaces of Deán Ortega (the Parador) and of Las Cadenas (Town Hall), the second by the main portals of Santa María and the Town Hall, and the third by the doors of La Consolada in the church of Santa María and the Palace of the Marqués de Mancera. They all create different, hierarchised spaces.

But while the square is interesting as a whole, the individual buildings forming its sides are even more so. The earliest, as we said above, is the church of Santa María, the former Colegiata, built over the grand mosque on the grounds of the Alcázar. What we see of it, the portals, are the last important element built in this urban setting, but it was adapted to the existing buildings by repeating their Vandelvira schemas. It was begun in 1604, under the auspices of Bishop Dávila, by the stonemasons Martín López de Alcaraz and Pedro del Cabo (father and son) and the sculptor Luis de Zayas. Inside there is an interesting ensemble of chapels and Gothic cloister, and magnificent railings by Maestro Bartolomé.

Opposite Santa María, Palacio de las Cadenas (now the Town Hall), the residence of Juan Vázquez de Molina, the nephew of Francisco de los Cobos and, like him, the secretary of Charles V and Philip II, is a magnificent example of palace architecture. Here we discover a mature Andrés de Vandelvira, familiar with Italian styles but still with plenty of Andalusian touches, and strong sense of rhythm in the distribution of pilasters and bays. Inside, the courtyard of arcades over slender white marble columns is reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance.

Continuing around the square, we can see another series of interesting buildings before we encounter the space defined by the Sacra Capilla del Salvador and Palacio del Deán Ortega. They include the Palace of the Marqués de Mancera, the Bishop's Prison and the old granary. The Palace of the Marqués de Mancera, which more logically would bear the name of its founder, the Canon Lope de Molina Valenzuela, is a fine example of an urban Alcázar or fortified palace of the late 16th-early 17th centuries, structured around a tower



with an overwhelmingly independent character and Mannerist decoration. The Bishop's Prison, also known as El Emparedamiento de Sancho Íñiguez, was originally use to house religious women. Of the original building, only part of the façade remains, the work of Pedro del Cabo. The granary or Antiguo Pósito, built in 1570, was remodelled in 1785.

And now we should be in front of the Sacra Capilla del Salvador. Founded by Francisco de los Cobos as a family burial chapel in 1535 after a papal bull from Paul III, Diego de Siloé was in charge of the project, and the work was carried out by Andrés de Vandelvira and Alonso Ruiz with various contracts, until its consecration in 1559. As a burial chapel, it has important symbolic values reflected in the spatial distribution and the sculptural decoration of the doorways, with a decisive contribution by Esteban Jamete. The building is structured around a large rotunda, covered by a dome, connecting its funerary character with the circular spaces familiar from Neolithic times, as well as Neo-Platonism, which sees the circle as the most perfect geometrical figure, and thus the closest to God. All of this, together with the sculptural decoration mentioned above, with a double symbolic value which speaks to us of death and of Christ the saviour, and with works of art of high value, suggests that despite a few Gothic altarpieces, we are contemplating

one of the most important buildings of Spanish Renaissance architecture.

Forming a corner with the Capilla Del Salvador, the Palace of Deán Ortega, the first chaplain of that chapel, is another example of urban palace architecture, structured on two floors around a central courtyard, strongly reminiscent of Granada thanks to the slenderness of its columns.

Not far from Plaza de Santa María, we find examples of 16th century architecture: the hospital of Los Honrados Viejos del Salvador and the destroyed palace of Francisco de los Cobos. An interesting courtyard of the hospital is conserved, with Serlian-inspired arches.

If we continue northwards, we come to Plaza del Mercado. Another square and another concept of square. As its name, Market Square, suggests, this was where the people of Úbeda came to buy, to have fun, and also, to carry out executions. Today it is a large rectangular space presided over by two notable buildings: the parish church of San Pablo and the former Town Halls or Casas Consistoriales, the Gothic and the Renaissance standing side by side, in a setting which still conserves a strongly popular flavour.

And while we are here, we can take the opportunity to visit the nearby convent of San Miguel and the oratory of San Juan de la Cruz. It is a good time to slow down, and a good place to reflect.

Let's go back. We've gone far enough. We can return via Plaza de san Pedro, first admiring the superb tower of the palace of the Marqués de Guadiana and the palace of the Marqueses de la

Rambla, and even visit the hospital of Santiago, Vandelvira's greatest work. But the reader should not think we have exhausted all the possibilities Úbeda can offer. We have had to leave aside many, not everything can be seen in a limited time, but we should mention them. Don't forget, dear reader, that our city should be visited at a leisurely pace, not at the speed of a package tour. My guide has only touched on a part of what can be enjoyed. We have said nothing of San Nicolás or San Isidoro; the palaces of the Busianos, of Vela de los Cobos, of the Marqués de Contadero, of the Torrente, of Bishop Canastero; Calle Gradas; the houses of Los Manueles or Los Salvajes; or the convents of Santa Clara, Las Carmelitas, La Trinidad, La Victoria, or Santa Catalina; and so many other things. Because Úbeda is not a city to be told about, but to be explored and enjoyed.

Don't you think it's a good time to do it?