6.1. WHO LIVED AT THE ALHAMBRA?

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In previous chapters we have learned about the history and the monumentality of the Alhambra. The time has come to look at an aspect that is less visible now but was fundamental in the past, and that explains its existence. I am referring to all the people who enjoyed it or suffered at its hand; those who spent their lives building it, maintaining it, defending it, and those who simply spent some time in it. All the men and women who filled this fascinating city, so rich and varied.

First we must remember that the Alhambra did not always have a stable and homogenous structure. The sultans gradually built their palaces and houses, walls and gates and the city evolved and gained in complexity, as did its inhabitants.

But we should start at the beginning. The Alhambra, in the early years of the Nasrid dynasty, was little more than what is currently the Alcazaba. This fortress is our first clear document about the initial population. This small space was occupied by a few members of the court, civil servants, soldiers, servants and the sultan's family. The military section of town gives us an invaluable image of the austere life that people lived at the beginning of the Nasrid dynasty. Houses were small, except the one identified as the first palace of the Alhambra. In addition to these dwellings, some storage facilities and/or barracks, in the form of silo-prisons, a cistern and the hammam, or baths, comprised the citadel's living spaces and utilities. The monumental Torre de la Vela and Torre del Homenaje provided some additional space for provisions, surveillance activity, a funny little dwelling in the highest part of the Torre del Homenaje, and, in the basement, some dreary dungeons or silos.

With Muhammad II, at the end of the 13th century, the Alhambra begins to take on more of the form and functions of a city. Houses and palaces start to be built around the whole area, which at this point is still more rural than urban. Many of these palaces would later be given to the families who collaborated closely with the rulers (such as the Abencerrajes), when the sultans had new, ever more
sumptuous ones built. Around this time the almunia or carmen called the Generalife was built, as a place of recreation and rest for the rulers. With Muhammad III, in the early years of the 14th century, the city became more consolidated and the population grew. He built the Palace of the Partal, and also the first of the Alhambra's many gates. He founded the mosque, a hammam adjacent to it, and the first street, called Calle Real or zanaqa, was also laid down, and along with it the Gate of Wine where the street begins.

With his successors, and throughout the 14th century, the Alhambra becomes a large palatine city, which must attend to the multiple needs associated with the presence of the Court, such as: royal functions (protocol and residence), military, economic, administrative and judicial functions, service, construction and maintenance activities, etc. All of this brought significant growth in population, people of diverse origins, social class, education and activity. The Sultan, his immediate family, his extended family, allies and collaborators, viziers and councillors, civil servants working in the areas of administration and justice, a large group of servants and slaves, the Sultan’s personal guards, officers and elite soldiers and, finally, the architects, engineers, builders, carpenters, artisans and calligraphers (to mention just a few of the better known ones), who created this absolutely unique marvel, make up an Alhambra that was densely populated, multidisciplinary and multiracial.

Among the figures or posts that resided, or would likely have resided, in the Alhambra, we must in the first place look at the sultans. They built the city with pride and made it richer with their successive palaces, each more striking than the last, to demonstrate their power and refinement, making the most of the victories won against the Christian enemy. In the second place, we must mention the vizier-poets, who were the ministers in charge of the Editorial Office (Diwan al Insha), whose functions included writing the texts that adorn the palace walls, which turned the Alhambra into the most beautifully published book of poetry. Besides these high-ranking dignitaries, it is reasonable to think that the Alhambra was the seat of other institutions of power, such as the Council of State, the Chancellery, the Supreme Court, the Royal Treasury, the Captaincy General, and that therefore the persons holding posts in them would probably also reside in the Alhambra. These would include lower-ranking ministers, secretaries, officers, civil servants, chiefs, whose close oversight would logically have been deemed important for reasons of loyalty and security.
Below these governing and surveillance bodies we have a large population that made the wheels of the complex palatine city turn. They lived primarily in the medina or the area around Calle Real, and particularly in the highest and southernmost section of the Alhambra, the area later known as the Secano. There is little evidence remaining about the experiences of the most humble classes in the Alhambra but in various areas some dwellings are visible, the remnants of a tannery, where hides were tanned, the ceramicists that made such beautiful tiles and other workshops necessary for serving the palace. It is thought that certain shops, workshops and markets must have also been present to respond to the needs of the working class. There are indications that a mint was located in this area. The military classes resided primarily in the Alcazaba and trusted members of this group guarded the towers. Very refined inhabitants occupied the qalahurras, or palace-towers, called Torre de la Cautiva (Captive's Tower) and Torre de las Infantas (Tower of the Princesses), which were smaller versions of a palatial residence. Other specific residences of strategic importance were the gates located within a tower-residence, which were cared for by a trusted alcaide. Finally, also worth highlighting are the little houses located next to the Tower of the Partal. Despite their simplicity, they testify quite beautifully to the presence of high quality residents, as shown by their ceiling and a lovely mural painting featuring horsemen and knights, a theme rarely found in the art of Al-Andalus.

We must bring this short exploration to an end. But it is important to remember that to fully respond to the question "Who lived in the Alhambra?" we must figure in the presence of numerous workers and visitors who came on a daily basis or sporadically for reasons related to work, audiences, requests, supplies, repairs or construction. Although they did not reside in the Alhambra, they lived for it and also thanks to it and it is easy to imagine a constant flow of people of many different professions who spent many an hour in this maze of structures and life that was and is the Alhambra.