

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 1

### 1.1. AL-ANDALUS AND GRANADA

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The city of Granada was part of al-Andalus throughout this long period of almost eight hundred years in the history of the Iberian Peninsula (711-1492), and twice became the capital of a kingdom: in the 11th century with the Zirid dynasty, and in the 13th-15th centuries under the Nasrids. This gives the city of Granada an urban, artistic and cultural profile that is unique in Spain and famous around the world. Its best-known examples are the Alhambra complex and the historic quarter of Albaicín, both Unesco World Heritage sites since 1984. For the first three centuries of al-Andalus the capital of Islamic Spain was Cordoba, the centre of emirates and caliphates (8th to 10th centuries). Granada seems to have been largely abandoned for Madinat Ilbira, but all that remains of that city is a few ruins in the plains of Granada, some objects in museums, and references in written sources. However, by the early 10th century Granada already had at least one small fortification, called Hisn al-Hamra', the Castle of the Alhambra (the Red), a settlement which centuries later would grow into the great palace and city we know today. Garnata (Granada) would make its decisive entrance into the history of al-Andalus after the breakup of the Caliphate of Cordoba, when the Zirids made it the capital of a taifa (1013-1090) which became the artistic, intellectual and military rival of Sevilla, Almería, Toledo, and Zaragoza. During the 11th century, Granada acquired the infrastructure of an active and complete Andalusí city, the main structures of which are still visible: the city walls and gates of the Alcazaba Cadima; the complex hydraulic system made up of channels, cisterns and baths; a renovated Alcazaba or fortress of the Alhambra; and various traces of the city's expansion towards the river Darro and the plain, where the Zirids built the Great Mosque of Granada on the site which would later be occupied by the Renaissance cathedral. 11th-century Granada saw Jewish culture flower into one of its most splendid periods in al-Andalus, starting when the Jewish scholar and politician Samuel ibn Naghrillah became first a secretary and then a vizier to the Zirid government. Granada's learned Ibn Ezra family, and the arrival in the court of the Malagan philosopher and poet Ibn Gabirol, the tutor of Joseph ib Naghrillah,

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who succeeded his father Samuel as chief vizier to King Badis, are fine examples. Meanwhile, the last Zirid king of Granada, Abdallah ibn Buluggin, offers historians of Arabic al-Andalus a key work, the *Kitab al-tibyan* (The book of clarification), a history of his reign in an autobiographical style, including valuable observations on the city's buildings and customs.

With the arrival of the Almoravid dynasty in 1090, and then the Almohad Caliphate in 1157, Granada would become a province of an empire, with both Berber dynasties regarding Marrakesh as their capital. The Almoravids made major changes to the Great Mosque of Granada and to some of its city walls and military buildings, and the Almohads extended the city's neighbourhoods and industries, building mosques, mansions, and country villas, and restored the Alcazaba of the Alhambra. This is when Avempace of Zaragoza, one of the most important Andalusí philosophers as well as a poet, musician and scientist, arrived in Granada. The city was also where Ibn Tufail began his career as a doctor, philosopher, and the author of *Philosophus Autodidactus*, one of the jewels of Andalusí literature and philosophy, and the best-known Arabic prose work after the *Thousand and One Nights*. 12th-century Granada also contributed to Andalusí culture with the splendid treatise on agronomy *Zahrat al-bustán* (The Flowers of the Garden) by al-Tighnari, and famous poems celebrating al-Andalus, characterised by an elegant hedonism and love of nature by the women writers Nazhun, Hafsa and Hamda, also known as the "poetess of al-Andalus", the poet Abu Ya'Far ibn Sa'id, and other great names of Andalusí literature such as Ibn Quzman, al-Kutandi, and Ciego de Almodóvar, who were drawn to Granada and its literary circles.

After the collapse of Almohad rule in Iberia, al-Andalus was reduced to the Nasrid kingdom and Granada again became the national capital (1238-1492) of all of Islamic Spain, including the modern-day provinces of Granada, Almería, and Málaga, and at its moment of maximum expansion in the 14th century, part of the neighbouring provinces of Jaén, Murcia, and Cádiz. Despite its small size, the last kingdom of al-Andalus would exist for 260 years, more than most Iberian Islamic or Christian kingdoms, and would continue to nurture the best of Andalusí science, literature, thought and art. Learned families like the Banu Yuzayy, Banu Hudhayl and Banu Asim, the poets of the Alhambra, including the historian, writer, doctor and vizier Ibn al-Khatib, the last of the great Andalusí polymaths



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and author of the *al-Ihata fi akhbar Gharnata*, the greatest biographical and historical encyclopedia of Andalusí Granada; the Banu Baso scientists, the doctors al-Shaquri and Ibn Shaqrà, and the mathematician al-Qalasadi, notably enriched the intellectual production of al-Andalus until the late 15th century. In Nasrid Granada civil architecture improved and flourished again, especially in the 14th century, with such outstanding works as al-Funduq al-Yadid (the New Inn, now known as the Corral del Carbón), still standing opposite the Alcaicería, as well as the Madrasa (Islamic college) and the Maristán (hospital), the only madrasa and hospital to be built in al-Andalus.

Also, the decision of the founder of the last state of al-Andalus, Muhammad Ibn al-Ahmar, to move the seat of government from the Albaicín to the hill of the Alhambra, both separate from and connected to the city, was significant, as his successors would add towers, palaces, gardens, almunias, and even a Great Mosque and a small medina quarter, creating the best-conserved palace-city of the classical Arabic-Islamic world, where the most cultured thought, theology, science and poetry of al-Andalus were placed at the service of magnificent architecture, ingenious garden design, and refined artistic creations which still enchant all who see them.