

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 1

### 1.2. GRANADA, CAPITAL OF THE ZIRID TAIFA (11th C)

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With the crisis and fall of the Roman Empire, many cities disappeared or were reduced to rural settlements. Granada was one of them. It shrank, its population dwindled, and it no longer looked like a city. By the Visigothic period the main town, Ilíberis, was located in Sierra Elvira (Atarfe). So when the Arab/Berber conquest took place, the capital was installed there and not in modern Granada. It would remain there until the 11th century. Until then, Granada was a small population clustered around a castle (*hisn*) in and around what is now the Albayzín neighbourhood.

Everything changed after 1013. As internal wars between rival caliphates threw al-Andalus into chaos (*fitna*), the Zirids, a group of Amazigh or Berbers of the Sanhaja clan who had arrived in Cordoba from the central Maghreb just a few years previously, decided to make their home in the *cora* or province of Elvira. There they came to an agreement with local representatives, offering them armed protection and political stability in return for loyalty and the payment of tributes. This agreement was the foundational pact of the Zirid kingdom of Granada.

The next step was to choose a new location for the capital. It was then proposed to move from Medina Elvira to Granada and found a new Islamic city. Granada was located on a hill and surrounded by natural moats, offering better defensive conditions; it was strategically placed at the centre of the fertile plain; and rivers ran around it, mainly the Darro and the Genil, ensuring an abundant water supply. From then on, Madinat Garnata, the capital and the main recipient of the kingdom's taxes, would experience an unprecedented urban expansion.

The 77 years of history of the Zirid Taifa (1013-1090) saw a succession of four sultans: Zawi, the chief who led the migration to al-Andalus and drove the foundation of Granada and its kingdom; Habbus, who completed the construction of the old alcazaba (*qadīma*) and began the great mosque; Badis, the sultan who ruled the longest and led the Taifa to its greatest territorial expansion with the occupation of

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Malaga (1057); and finally, Abdallah, famous for building a castle on the hill of the Alhambra, but above all for writing his Memoirs, now our major source of knowledge for this period.

One characteristic of the Zirid kingdom was its ethnic and religious pluralism. As well as Amazigh sultans, soldiers, and politicians, who were in fact a minority, there was a substantial population of Muladí (Christian converts to Islam and their descendants), Mozarabs (Christians already living under Arab rule), and especially a large and important Jewish community. In this community, which would flourish as never before until the pogrom of 1066, an outstanding political and intellectual figure was Samuel or Isma'il ibn Naghrillah (or Nagrela), who was vizier and secretary to the kingdom in the decisive years of the Zirid Taifa.

## **Madinat Garnata**

Everything seems to indicate that the first area to be occupied was the early medieval fortress (*ḥiṣn*) which would become part of the configuration of the *alcazaba* or walled citadel. Archaeological interventions, conserved remains, and written documentation enable us to reconstruct what the Zirid city would have looked like. The most protected part would be the *alcazaba*, with a considerable size of about 15 hectares, more or less coinciding with the Albayzín neighbourhood. What we now call the old *alcazaba* or *qadima*, to differentiate it from the new *alcazaba* of the Alhambra, can still be seen in the remains of the previous city walls on Cuesta de la Alhacaba slope, on Carril de San Cecilio street where the Castro gate (*Bāb Qaṣṭar*) was located, and crossing Calle Espaldas de San Nicolás street and continuing down to San Juan de los Reyes. The city wall was built using the *tapial de cal y canto* technique (a framework was used as a mould for rammed earth walls, with plenty of river stones to add solidity) and punctuated with a series of towers, many of which are still standing; for example, one forms part of the Albayzín Health Centre, and others stand on Calle Charca street, Carmen de Aben Humeya, Calle Guinea street, and Placeta de las Escuelas square.

Later, the Zirid wall would follow the same line along Calle San Juan de los Reyes street, where the odd-numbered houses leaned on or formed part of it, and then climbing again to Puerta Monaita gate.

From there, the city would spread from the Albayzín district in two directions, east and southwest towards the plain. To the east, it would cover what is now the San Pedro neighbourhood, known as

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Arrabal de Axares. Towards the plain, it stretched from the Puerta Monaita gate, past the Puerta Elvira gate and San Juan de Dios street to Plaza de Bib-Rambla square (the Rambla gate).

Puerta de Elvira gate (Bāb Ilbīra) is one of the city's most important extant 11<sup>th</sup>-century structures. While it would have been smaller than today and configured differently, it already had a highly innovative feature, as did the Puerta de Monaita gate: a bent entrance. The decisive step in consolidating the settlement on the plain would be the construction of the great mosque, on the approximate site of the present-day church of El Sagrario, next to the Cathedral. This marks a fundamental milestone in the urban fabric of Granada, as it would create a new political, religious, and socio-economic hub which would endure throughout the Andalusi period and even to modern times.

An essential element for the existence and maintenance of the city is water. For Granada to become a city, the Zirids had to construct and perfect a series of hydraulic infrastructures. The most important was the Aynadamar canal or *acequia*, which took water from the Fuente Grande, a spring in Alfacar, into the heart of the *qadima* fortress, distributing it among the strategically placed *aljibes* or cisterns, such as the Aljibe del Rey which held 300 cubic metres, the *aljibe* of the Mosque of the Murabitin (which now belongs to the church of San José), and very probably the *aljibe* of Las Tomasas.

Two more canals took water from the river Darro: the Axares, which ran through San Juan de los Reyes, supplied the Bañuelo (11th-century Arab baths) and the *aljibe* of the great mosque; and the Romayla, which supplied the left side of the medina, where the artisans worked (the potteries, textile workshops, etc.). Finally, in the reign of Abdallah, the Acequia Gorda (the “big canal”) was created to bring water from the river Genil to the suburbs south of the medina, an area of gardens and orchards.

As well as these canals, Granada had a *coracha*, a complex of buildings which enabled water to be raised from the river Darro to a small castle built on the site of the Alhambra. A *coracha* is a stretch of wall which branches out from an enclosure to protect and give access to a source of water. The *coracha* of Granada ran from the Alhambra castle, across the river, to the Albayzín district. All that exists of it today are the remains of the Puerta de los Tableros gate (Bāb al-Difāf), which can be seen from Paseo de los Tristes promenade.

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As mentioned above, Zirid Granada had two important mosques. One was the Mosque of the Marabouts in the Albayzín district, on the site of the church of San José, whose belltower is the original 11th-century minaret, one of the most valuable examples of built heritage from the Zirid period. This tower still has its horseshoe arch, from the tradition of Cordoba, and typical coursed stonework with several projecting headers in the style of a running bond. The other is the great mosque in the flat part of the city, where the church of the Sagrario now stands. All we have of this are plans, descriptions and engravings from after the Castilian conquest, but we know it had a minaret of similar characteristics.

To summarise, the Zirid period is the most important in the history of Granada. It saw the city expand to a size close to its historic maximum, at least until modern times. It was equipped with the hydraulic infrastructure it needed, which remained in use well into the 20th century, and the first castle was established on the Sabika hill, marking the way for the alcazaba of the Alhambra two centuries later.