

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 1

### 1.3. THE NASRID KINGDOM

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The foundation of the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada in the 13th century was a direct consequence of the Almohad crisis of power, after their defeat by Christian forces in the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (1212), marking the start of the transitional “third Taifas” period (1228-1238). One of the Taifas or kingdoms to arise in that decade was created by the founder of the Nasrid dynasty or the Banū Naṣr, the emir Muḥammad I (1232-1273), the main rival of the emir of Murcia, Ibn Hūd al-Mutawwakil, who had reunified the Andalusian territories that Muḥammad I was now conquering in turn.

Muḥammad I came to power after several military victories, proclaimed emir by the people of his birthplace, Arjona (now province of Jaén) in the great mosque after public prayers on a Friday in the middle of July 1232. Gradually, more and more cities became part of his domains, most importantly Malaga, Almería and Granada in 1238, and Granada was finally chosen as the capital of his kingdom thanks to its rugged, defensible terrain, and also because it was farther from the Christian frontier than Jaén.

Once settled in Granada, Muḥammad I took the first measures which would be the basis for the legitimacy of his dynasty: his choice of the new seat of power and later royal residence, the building which had been known as “the Alhambra” (al-Ḥamrā’, “the red [fort]”) since the 9th century, where he improved the precarious fortifications; the use of the colour red, which like the name of the Alhambra, was linked with his soubriquet Ibn al-Aḥmar as a hue representing the symbols of Nasrid power; and finally, like any other medieval Islamic dynasty, the creation of a prestigious genealogy to legitimise the political and religious power of his new line, a strategy which would be ubiquitous in the 13th century. To this end, the Nasrid courtiers resorted to skillful wordplay based on the etymological root of the Arabic na-ṣa-ra (“help to win”), shared by the family names Banū Naṣr and Anṣār al-Nabī (“the helpers

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of the Prophet”), connecting the latter to a prestigious confederation of Arab tribes from Medina who had received the same name in the 7th century for helping the Prophet Mohammed in his *hijra* or flight from Mecca to that city.

The Nasrid kingdom gradually consolidated in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, a process which is already visible in the pivotal reign of Muḥammad II (1273-1302). The Nasrids were becoming more interested in creating a dynasty, and their administrative systems were becoming more structured, while they were also gradually expanding their architectural horizons in the Alhambra itself, with works like the Generalife palace. Despite this, the common denominators marking the development of Nasrid politics in the 14th century were, on one hand, the internal instability of the Nasrid dynasty itself –due to the incessant usurpations and political crimes of the sultans and their rivals within their own family– and maintaining the precarious balance of forces with the kingdom of Castile and the Marinid Sultanate of Fez in order to survive and keep control of the Strait of Gibraltar.

The agnatic network of relatives at the core of the Banū Naṣr clearly explains many of the abrupt changes in the Nasrid ruling family: as well as apparently political causes there was the determining factor of several possible successors when an emir died, as they would have numerous sons thanks to the practice of polygamy with both legitimate wives and concubines. The rise to power of Ismāʿīl I (1314-1325), due to a lack of male descendants of Muḥammad III and Naṣr, can only be explained in this way; his coronation has always been interpreted as a change of the ruling branch of the Nasrid family, as he was not a direct descendant of Muḥammad I, Muḥammad II, or Naṣr, but came from a parallel branch as the son of their sister Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar and a member of the Nasrid family, but in fact his right to rule rested on his mother’s royal blood, as she was a direct descendant of the legitimate ruling branch. This phenomenon of power being transmitted through the female line happened on several occasions in the Nasrid ruling family, leading us to wonder what would have happened if the women of this dynasty were legitimate bearers of the lines of succession without sidelining them until a lack of heirs to the emirs of the time made them useful.

The dynasty of Ismāʿīl (or of Fāṭima) gradually led the kingdom -not without problems along the way, including political assassinations and military victories and defeats- to its era of greatest splendour, the reigns of Yūsuf I and Muḥammad V. Both were notable for peace treaties signed with the kingdoms of

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Castile and Aragon and with the Marinid Sultanate of Fez; for illustrious courtiers and intellectuals like Ibn al-Āyayyāb (d. 1349), Ibn al-Jaṭīb (d. 1374) and Ibn Zamrak (d. 1394), authors of many of the poems inscribed in the Alhambra; and above all, for their intensive building programmes, both in Granada – including the palace of Bibataubín, the Puerta Bibrabla gate or the Arenal gate, the Madrasa, the Alhóndiga Nueva (Corral del Carbón) and the Maristán or hospital- and in the Alhambra itself, with the Puerta de la Justicia gate, the Calahorra of Yūsuf I or Tower of the Captive, the Partal oratory, and the Comares and Leones palaces. Muḥammad V was exiled to Fez in 1359 in a palace coup by his half-brother Ismāʿīl II and his mother, the concubine Rīm, but returned to power in 1362. When he finally died in 1391, he left a prosperous kingdom which would soon begin a major internal dynastic crisis, setting it on the path to its final downfall.

The end of the Nasrid kingdom in the early 15th century was presided over by two emirs, Muḥammad VII (1392-1408) and the poet king Yūsuf III (1409-1417). Their reigns began its political and territorial decadence, exacerbated by an active dynamic of palace coups, leveraged by courtly families such as the Abencerrajes to increase their political influence. Outside the palace, a much more consolidated kingdom of Castile was ramping up pressure on the kingdom of Granada, with numerous border skirmishes and losses of important territories such as Antequera (1410). Reigns which were constantly interrupted by other candidates, such as the rule of Muḥammad IX “el Zurdo” (1419-1427; 1430-1431; 1432-1445; 1447-1453), created even more problems for the dynasty, even though he signed several treaties with the Christian kingdoms of Iberia and pursued intense diplomatic activity, with the personal participation of women from his immediate family, such as his sister Fāṭima and his wife Zahr al-Riyāḍ.

Over time this situation would lead to the power triangle represented by Muley Hacén, El Zagal, and Boabdil, the central figures of what is called the “Granada War” (1482-1492); a period in which the Nasrid kingdom wavered between waging its own civil and family wars on one hand, and facing the strengthening Christian forces of the peninsula and the impetus of the “Reconquista” on the other, especially after the marriage of the Catholic Monarchs in 1469 unified their kingdoms. This triangle of power –also seen in the unyielding enmity between the wife of Muley Hacén, Āʿīša, the mother of Boabdil, and his concubine Soraya as they strove to ensure their own sons would succeed him– weakened the dynasty even more, until the death of Muley Hacén in 1485 and the exile of El Zagal to

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Tlemcen in 1489 would leave Boabdil as the sole emir of Granada. The weakness of Boabdil had been on display while he was held captive by the Catholic Monarchs at the battle of Lucena (1483), and they were now able to take advantage of it to seize the Nasrid kingdom, rocked by power struggles, civil war, and the devastation of the territory by the Christians. When the entire emirate had been conquered and Granada was under siege, the Nasrid capital was forced to capitulate on 2 January 1492. Boabdil was granted an estate in the hills of La Alpujarra, but finally departed for Fez with his mother Ā'īša, leaving behind a Mudéjar population faced with surviving in a newly Christian territory in which the terms of the Capitulations would not be respected. A sad end for a prosperous kingdom, which had defied the odds to prolong the history of al-Andalus.