

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 2

### 2.1. THE URBAN STRUCTURE OF ANDALUSI GRANADA

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One of the characteristics of the medinas of al-Andalus is an apparently chaotic, random street plan, which turns out to be not random at all when we analyse its structure and recognise the principles underlying its foundation and subsequent development. To reach this level of understanding, it is vital to know how to combine the information offered by historical analysis of the city's layout, historical sources, and archaeology.

The medina of Granada occupies a space between the last ridges of the Baetic mountains, in contact with the Vega plain, crossed by three rivers (the Darro, Genil, and Beiro), and built on the site of an ancient Ibero-Roman town which had practically disappeared by the 6th century CE.

Madina Garnata was founded on the remains of the ancient Florentia Iliberritana, first as a small fortified settlement which was revitalised in the 9th century, occupying the highest part of the Albaicín hill, which is the space of the first Islamic medina, outlined by its walls and gates.

The city was founded anew in the 1025s, now as the capital of the Zirid kingdom, and began to spread over the plain. Surrounded by a new defensive perimeter, inside there was a clear separation of the urban space between the left and right banks of the Darro. The left bank had symbolically important buildings such as the great mosque, begun in 1055, and the Madrasa, which was added in the Nasrid period. Other significant spaces in the surrounding area included the alcaicería (the market for silk and other precious goods); alhóndigas or inns such as Los Genoveses, Zaida, and the funduq al-Yidida (Corral del Carbón); and linear souks or markets which connected the main entrance gates with the most important streets. The main network of streets consisted of several axes starting at the entrance gates, which ran north-south, like Calle Elvira street, or east-west, such as the Zacatín or Calle Cárcel Baja streets, with side streets branching off them. The interior of city blocks and the homes within them could be entered via wall-walks. Unlike the Christian world, there were no great public squares, just a few wider spaces where

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streets met or in sparsely populated areas, which were normally used for markets. Thus, Granada's Plaza de Bibarrambla square was a small, irregular space which served this function thanks to its proximity to access routes, commercial spaces and artisan quarters.

In contrast to the idea of an irregular street plan, archaeology and the analysis of the distribution of plots show a certain tendency to regularity, with more winding streets appearing only as time went by and the urban space became denser, invading the public spaces. An example is the Axares district (Bajo Albaicín) where most streets are at right angles to thoroughfares marking its borders -San Juan de los Reyes to the north and Carrera del Darro street to the south- and laid out almost parallel, reflecting the adaptation of what was originally an agricultural space, watered by the Axares canal, to an urban space which maintains the layout of the network of irrigation ditches.

The presence of the river also conditioned the placement of the main artisan activities: as it passed through the lower part of the city it was used by the tanneries and textile industries on the right bank, while the left bank was mainly occupied by potteries.

Another important element within the urban structure was the existence of a fortress. Granada is unusual in having two of these spaces representing power: the first fort stood within the original medina, between Calle Pilar Seco street, Plaza de San Miguel Bajo square, and Carril de la Lona lane, until it was replaced by the Alhambra in the 13th century. However, it remained there as a palace until the 15th century.

The medina founded in the 11th century began to be overcrowded and spread beyond its boundaries in the 12th century, when the southern districts were formed, including Alfareros (the potteries) and the Loma neighbourhood (Nayd); and to the north, El Albaicín. They have different structures: in the southern districts, the neighbourhoods are side by side with market gardens, potteries and a large cemetery, while the Albaicín began as scattered settlements which gradually coalesced. In the Nasrid era another district formed next to the Bab al-Ramla, but unlike the others it was never enclosed by a wall. The water supply, both for human consumption and for the vegetable gardens in and near the town, was organised as a network of canals and ditches: the acequias of Aynadamar and Axares and the Acequia Gorda, with more being added over time.



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Finally, within the city there was also a place for the dead. While the main cemetery was outside the city wall, next to the Puerta de Bibarrambla gate (the maqbara of Bab Ilbira or Sahl b. Malik), there were also burial places within the walls, such as in the upper Albaicín (Cruz de la Rauda) and Nayd.