

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 2

2.2. THE DEFENSIVE SYSTEM OF ISLAMIC GRANADA

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One of the elements defining the Andalusí medina is the existence of a defensive system, which varies in complexity depending on the characteristics of each city. Historians and archaeologists have been researching the city walls and gates of Granada for some time, but recently, thanks to advances in archaeological practice, we have a much more precise understanding of these systems. There are still substantial remains of walls, towers and defensive enclosures in the city's built heritage which show us what the city walls of Islamic Granada were like.

Having a walled perimeter always significantly affects the later development of a city. Normally, the line of the walls and location of the gates are established at the time of the city's foundation, and they would only be extended or improved in the case of major transformations, as in the case of Granada's evolution from a small medina in the 9th-10th centuries to the capital of the Zirid kingdom in the 11th century, when the city was re-founded. After the wall was built, over time it would be remodelled and improved (adding *faussebrayes*, *barbicans*, *albarrana* towers, etc.) to meet changing needs. The gates were the most important and symbolic points, as the spaces where the city connected to the suburbs or periphery, places which everyone had to go through, and as well as military uses could serve taxation purposes and even be a *cordon sanitaire* in epidemics. Near the gates there were usually market spaces (*souks*), some improvised and others regulated by the State, and their monumental scale, as seen in the *Puerta de Elvira* or *Puerta Bibarrambla* gates, also meant the area was a focus for building activity.

Granada, the heir of *Florentia Iliberritana*, retained its ancient city walls and added them to its defensive system during the early medieval period. This is noted in 9th-century historical sources as a legendary event, and has been confirmed by archaeology: the remains uncovered in the *Albaicín* district, which show the sporadic reuse of part of the ancient Ibero-Roman defences (*Carmen de la Muralla* and *Puerta de Hernán Román* gate).

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The original nucleus of the medieval city is the Alcazaba Qadima. The walls enclosed its northern flank along Carril de San Cecilio lane and at the top of the slope bordered by Cuesta de la Alhacaba, descending to their southern limit on Calle San Juan de los Reyes street / Placeta de las Escuelas square. This first enclosure, which included much of the extended Ibero-Roman walls, has several gates: Bab al-Qastar, Bab al-Asad or Portillo del León, and Puerta de Monaita (Bab al-Unaydar) to the north; Bab al-Ta'ibin, at the south-eastern end; Bab al Bonud, to the east; and Puerta de los Esteros (Bab al-Hassrin) to the south, marking the main thoroughfares inside the city.

The axis formed by Calle San Juan de los Reyes street has the most stretches of city wall discovered by archaeology, consisting in all cases of rammed earth, lime mortar and stones (tapial de hormigón de cal y canto), with sandstone slabs laid in running bond style with protruding headers where two angles meet. It is punctuated by small towers acting as buttresses and other larger towers.

On the north side some good examples of towers are still extant, and notably the recently excavated and restored remains of the Zirid city walls at Carmen de la Muralla and Bab al-Qastar, the most monumental part of the original Islamic enclosure, and represents all the construction systems of the period.

The historic event of moving the capital from Medina Elvira to Granada in the first quarter of the 11th century meant that the town had to be expanded, and a new design was required, with the city now spreading onto the plain (la Vega). This new Madina Garnata would endure until 1492. The descent to the plain and the inclusion of the course of the river Darro in the urban fabric led to new defensive needs: the city was now vulnerable to the possibility of attack from the river. Floodgates were built to cut off the river - Bab al-Dabbagin and Bab al Difaf - and the river embankments became defensive walls.

Very little remains standing of the walled perimeter of the city on either bank of the Darro. The contribution of archaeology has been fundamental on the western side, between the right bank of the Darro and the Puerta de Elvira gate. In recent years, excavations have uncovered the remains of two of the main gates, Bab al-Ramla (Puerta de Bibarrambla gate) and Bab al-Masda (Puerta del Corro gate), as well as several stretches of city wall. The archaeological sequence in all these points is very similar: the first 11th-century structures were substantially reinforced in the Almoravid era, in 1125 and 1126, introducing for the first time a *faussebrayes* and a barbican to improve the city's defences. The main

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material is rammed earth and lime mortar (*tapial de cal*), with brick or sandstone block reinforcements at some corners. The position of the towers created closed compartments which ensured the integrity of the entire defensive system. The most iconic points, such as the Puerta Bibarrambla gate, were rebuilt to a monumental scale in the first half of the 14th century.

The saturation of the urban space led to the formation of new neighbourhoods, with the two largest being the Albaicín district to the north, and Alfareros and Loma (Nayd) to the south. The Nayd neighbourhood was the first to have a perimeter wall, which included the palace grounds of Cuarto Real de Santo Domingo. The remains of this wall can also be seen on Paseo del Violón promenade. The gates leading to the Vega were Puerta del Pescado and Puerta de los Molinos. They are thought to have been built by Sultan Muhammad II (1273-1302).

A few years later, the Albaicín district was enclosed by a wall ascending the hill of San Miguel. The growth of this neighbourhood, one of the most populous of Nasrid Granada, made the wall essential, as the defence of the city would be at the mercy of the topographical weakness of the hilltop. The line of the wall was adapted to the terrain in such a way as to eliminate all the vulnerable points. Like the walls of the southern neighbourhoods, this was also rammed earth and lime mortar, following the terrain and dotted with solid towers, with rectangular and quadrangular plans, and a few with prow-shaped pentagonal plans. The walls were pierced by Puerta de Fajalauza and Puerta de San Lorenzo gates, this latter also known as the Puerta del Albaicín. The district was connected to the city via the Puerta de Hierro, a gate forming part of the complex of Puerta de Elvira and Puerta de Guadix gates, on Cuesta del Chapiz slope. All of this construction work took place in the first half of the 14th century, during the reign of Yusuf I.

The system was complemented by fortified enclosures which formed part of the city, ensuring its defence in strategic positions, but at the same time being separated from the rest. Apart from the Alhambra, which fits the typology of a palace-citadel, we can note the fortress of El Mauror, or Torres Bermejas towers; Bibataubín castle; the Bab Ilbira enclosure; and Torre del Aceituno tower, now the chapel of San Miguel Alto. Most of them originated in the 11th century, but were remodelled to their present form in the Nasrid period.