

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 2

2.4. MOSQUES AND THEIR URBAN DISTRIBUTION

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Mosques are places of worship used by followers of the Islamic faith, and thus have a central role in Muslim society and in Muslim town planning. Initially the mosques, especially the great mosques or aljamas (al-Masʿid al-Ŷamiʿ), were essential for cohesion among the new Muslim community, and for spreading the faith. Gradually, they became political and administrative instruments of the State. In the great mosques dynastic successions were proclaimed, appointments of minor authorities were recognised, legal and administrative functions were carried out, and the treasure of the habices (donations) was safeguarded. They were also spaces for teaching religion and other subjects, and were used for housing the poor and strangers. Neighbourhood mosques complemented their religious function with the administration of the local community's affairs.

In the city of Granada at the end of the Nasrid period there were 137 mosques according to the books of donations, although they were built throughout the Andalusí period. Seco de Lucena found the locations of some 26 of them, although only three have extant remains.

The insertion of these mosques in the city's urban fabric is determined by the need for water as part of the rituals surrounding Muslim prayer, so they had to be built near canals and cisterns. They have also been found near public baths. Similarly, we know that except for one (a mosque serving converts), the qibla of the other mosques found faced southeast, towards Mecca.

Another characteristic of the mosques of madīna Garnāṭa is the connection of some of them to guilds of artisans, who seem to have paid for their construction. Examples are the tanners' mosque (masʿid al-Dabbāgīn) on the right bank of the Darro and the silk and cotton weavers' mosque (masʿid al-Qattānīn) in the Alcaicería, among others.

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Within the city of Granada, the cases we know best are:

1. The city's great mosque or aljama: built by order of the Zirids in the first half of the 11th century. It was located in the space now occupied by the church of El Sagrario, although its courtyard and minaret would have been in the area at the foot of the Cathedral. According to available sources, it had 11 naves at right angles to the qibla wall, articulated by wooden supports (post and beam structure) until 1116 when the Almoravids replaced them with marble columns.
2. The great mosque of the al-Bayyazin district: a mosque built in the Almohad period (mid-12th to mid-13th centuries). Its ablutions courtyard is still extant, inside the Colegiata del Salvador church. This courtyard has a rectangular plan and is surrounded by three porticoes articulated by pointed horseshoe arches on pillars, following the example of the great Almohad aljamas such as the Kutubiyya in Marrakesh. The prayer hall was organised in 9 naves with 86 columns, according to Münzer.
3. The mosque of the Conversos (converts): one of the mosques in the Axares neighbourhood, also built in the Almohad period (mid-12th to mid-13th centuries). Its minaret survives as the belltower of the church of San Juan de los Reyes. This minaret has a square plan (4.78 m each side) and a central pillar with ramps on each side, following the model of Almohad minarets such as the Giralda or the Kutubiyya in Marrakesh. Made of rammed earth and brick, it is notable for the remains of decoration characteristic of the Almohad period, with panels of sebka, strapwork friezes, shell motifs and kufic calligrams.
4. The minaret of the mosque of al-Murabitin: now the belltower of the church of San José. Built in the 11th century, although researchers are divided as to whether it is Zirid or Almoravid. The minaret has a quadrangular plan, 3.85 m each side, with a central pillar with stairs on each side. In stone, it has no extant exterior decoration.