

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 2

### 2.5. FUNERARY RITES. CEMENTRIES

By *Alberto García Porras*

Department of Medieval History and Science and Historic Techniques. UGR.

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#### CEMENTERIES IN AL-ANDALUS

Cemeteries in the Islamic West were known as maqbara (pl. maqābir) and were usually located outside the walls, near a gate and flanking a road into the city. This placement in a high-traffic area close to the city allowed the inhabitants to visit often and to feel connected to their dead loved ones. However, this nearby location in such a dynamic space on the edge of town presented an obstacle for the natural development of the urban fabric. Thus, they were sometimes absorbed as the city grew.

Cities with large populations usually had more than one cemetery, as was the case in Granada. There were also several types of necropolis, depending on size, the public served, and even restrictions on who could be buried there. Some were small, serving a neighbourhood, and others were large and open to the whole city. Meanwhile, a palatine alcazaba (or citadel) would usually have its own burial places, known as a Rawḍa (garden). We know the Alhambra of Granada had one next to the old mosque, where several Nasrid monarchs were buried. These smaller and more compact necropolises are organised in a different way.

The uniform landscape of Islamic necropolises could be interrupted by buildings housing the tomb of a notable person, venerated for their piety and asceticism. This type of building is a qubba, on a square plan and often with a dome. However, they did not always have to be connected to a cemetery. They could be completely independent, and sometimes led to the later creation of a small necropolis as tombs and burials began to cluster around the original tomb of the saintly individual. These small single buildings could appear in the outskirts or even further from the city, next to a road. Sometimes there was so much devotion to this figure that other structures with religious significance would be built abutting their tomb, creating a site known as a zāwiya, where people would go to seek protection, shelter and relief. It is said that the town of La Zubia got its name because there were so many buildings of this type on its outskirts.

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## ISLAMIC TOMBS AND FUNERARY CUSTOMS

Muslim tombs tend to be very simple and sober. They vary from one Islamic region to another, and depending on when they were built. The body would usually be buried lying on its side, pointing south and with its face towards Mecca. It would lie directly on the ground, covered by a simple shroud.

Therefore, graves were not very wide, and in most cases were dug into the rock or into untouched ground. In Islamic culture the dead are not often buried with grave goods, although excavations have found elements of personal adornment (pendants, rings, etc.), perhaps an amulet, and sometimes a few pieces of pottery, especially in the late Middle Ages.

To distinguish the surface of a burial plot, stelae were sometimes used, which could be stone slabs or large pieces of glazed pottery. On other occasions tombs were edged with *maq̄abrīya*, long stone or marble stelae, with a triangular section. In Granada these slabs were usually made of sandstone, which is easy to work. For this reason, we often find them with various types of marks or decorations. Many of these stelae were used after the conquest of Granada for building churches.

## CEMETEIRES IN GRANADA

There were at least eight cemeteries in medieval Granada: *maqbara Socaster*, next to the wall of the *Alcazaba Qadīma*, next to the *Puerta de las Pesas* gate; *maqbara al-Rawḍa min al-Bayyāzīn*, inside the wall of the *Albaicín* district and spreading down the steep slope from what is now the chapel of *San Miguel Alto*; *maqbara al-Sabīka*, on the slope which now climbs to the *Alhambra*; *maqbara al-Gurabā'*, next to the river *Genil* and the *Puerta de Bibataubin* gate; *maqbara bāb al-Fajjārīn*, next to the gate of the same name, between *Plaza de Fortuny* and *Campo del Príncipe*; *maqbara Mawrūr*, next to the gate of the same name; *maqbara al-‘Assāl*, in the same neighbourhood but nearer the outskirts, in the area known as *Huerta de Belén* and *Huerta de los Ángeles*; and *maqbara al-faqīh Sa‘d ibn Mālik* or *bāb Ilbīra*, which was the largest.