

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 2

### 2.6. MARKETS AND *ALHONDIGAS*

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One of the elements characterising medieval Islamic cities is the presence of spaces for trade, markets and places where goods and money changed hands. In fact, markets and cities naturally depend on each other: markets need to trade with their immediate surroundings to survive, and as a gathering place and a distribution hub, they stimulate, drive, and coordinate commercial activity.

This general principle can be seen even more clearly in medieval Islamic cities. Medieval Islamic society is mercantile in nature. It emerges in a setting where trade was well-known and fluid, and a market economy is one of its options for economic development and growth. Trade took place at every level and was clearly reflected in the space, so that the first Islamic towns already had these commercial spaces.

The cities of al-Andalus also developed this mercantile facet very early on. For example, the foundation of Pechina (Almería) was linked to the activity of artisans and merchants. We can point to the markets of 9th-century Córdoba, and the 10th-century of the same city which recorded over 80 shops, without including *alhondigas*. In the Caliphate of Málaga there were buildings in the old port area which are believed to be warehouses. Denia and Almería are already recorded in the 10th century as international centres of Mediterranean trade. Even in the 14th century, there was praise for the transformation of Gibraltar into a city by providing it with souks, a great mosque, and public baths.

The market manifested at various levels, using different structures in the urban fabric. There was a first level of local trade, from the countryside to the city. This mainly took place in markets outside the walls, on the outskirts of the city, but still within its orbit. We know of small markets, the semi-urban souks, which could emerge very early on. The weekly nature of one of these, in Granada, is revealed by its name: *suq al jamis*, the Thursday market. In the 11th century this may have been located on the outskirts of the city, near the great mosque (now the cathedral), which was then on the periphery.

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A second level dealt with the distribution of products between regions. We know that from the mid-12th century al-Andalus had well-established trade routes. Idrisi, for example, shows us the image of a territory with good communications, with Granada connected to such important centres as Córdoba, Jaén, Murcia, Almería, and Málaga.

This level would be accompanied by the appearance of marketplaces, permanent souks, which in Granada and other cities such as Seville were located in the city centre, in privileged positions such as the area around the great mosque. This location, as a protected space next to the place of prayer, offered security for foreign merchants, and was thus often chosen for permanent marketplaces, which would grow in a linear fashion, occupying whole streets and even forming specialised neighbourhoods of shops. Even the courtyard of the mosque could become a space for trade. The places closest to the mosque would be taken by shops and stalls relating to religious activity, books, wax, perfumes and spices, luxury objects, food, etc., while the souks which specialised in goods whose production and sale could be bothersome or dirty in some way (ceramics, glass, leather, fabrics, etc.) would be further away.

The centre of the madīna, its most prestigious area, not only contained these commercial districts. We also find some of the most notable structures here which housed activities relating to international trade. For example, the alcaicerías. These were commercial establishments, arranged in various ways: as a courtyard with porticoes or galleries; a street, covered or not, with open stalls; or even a small district of narrow streets with shops; they had the exclusive right to sell luxury products such as imported silk, which incurred special taxes.

And we also find the alhóndigas, as spaces for storing goods and receiving merchants. This basic function determined their architectural structure, with two floors, the lower for storing goods and the upper offering merchants accommodation.

They could be public or privately owned. They might specialise in a certain type of good, with accommodation for its merchants, or be more general. They could also contain artisan workshops, or simply be spaces for merchants to meet and do business.

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And finally, they could become the equivalent of consulates, seats of official representation for foreign merchants, offered by the local authorities to the merchant communities with whom they had trade agreements. These are the famous fondacos (funduq or caravansera) which are mentioned in the documents of the leading European trading nations active in Islamic territory. We know of their existence in the largest cities, such as here in Granada where there was an alhóndiga for Genoans, and also in Almería and Málaga. In these cases, they were enclosed buildings, well-protected to the point of sometimes being impregnable fortresses, consisting of one or more architectural structures with guest rooms and storerooms, but they could also include chapels, ovens, or baths.

In Granada there are records and archaeological remains indicating there were many alhóndigas in the trading area. Still extant, the Alhóndiga Nueva (funduq al- yadida), also known as the Corral del Carbón, is the most important building of this kind conserved in Al-Andalus, built by Yūsuf I in the mid-14th century.

This monumental building signified the expansion of the city's main trading area, at that time already occupying the area around the great mosque on the site where the cathedral now stands, and was connected to it by a bridge over the river Darro. Its structure follows the classic eastern model, with a central courtyard surrounded by four porticoed walkways, overlooked by the various guest rooms. It was the property of the royal women at the end of the Nasrid period, and may have specialised in the sale of wheat. Later, in the 17th century, charcoal was sold here, giving it its modern name.

These fine buildings allow us to see the importance of trade in the Islamic city.