

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 2

2.7. THE ALMUNIAS OF THE CITY OF GRANADA

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In all the cities of al-Andalus, the elites owned farms and country estates which were used both for production and as places of leisure. Having a second residence on these estates meant that they were usually not too distant from the cities. Although their location in the territory was largely dictated by topography and water resources, they also followed patterns of territorial implementation. In Arabic sources they are cited with the following names: *munya*, *bustān*, *ŷanna*, *dār*, *qaṣr*, *karm*, *ḥuṣṣ*, and *buḥayra*. The most common names around Granada were *dār* and *qaṣr*. While not dismissing some functional specificities in these names, we believe them to be broadly synonymous. However, the generally accepted Spanish term used by students of this phenomenon is the Arabic loanword ‘*almunia*’, as this is the only one to have passed directly to Castilian, making it easy to recognise. The study of their organisation and functions is a vital historical subject, as they represented an important source of income for their owners. Most of them were used for irrigation farming to serve the local market. Others did not include natural water sources or irrigation systems, and thus were mostly devoted to dryland farming. The close relationship they all had with the nearest city is a very important factor in understanding their effect on the rapid development of all these urban centres, especially starting in the 11th century.

The *almunias* are probably one of the least known examples of the material heritage of al-Andalus, which has propitiated their destruction, especially the loss of cultivated areas and the hydraulic structures which supplied them. Their location on the outskirts of cities also encouraged the urbanisation of their farmland during the great expansion of these cities in the 20th century, especially the second half. This is why the few examples which are still extant are mostly decontextualised, such as the Alcázar Genil in Granada or the Aljafería in Zaragoza. In the *alfoz* of the city of Granada, the Nasrid sultans (13th-15th centuries) had various *almunias* which are relatively well known, both from texts and from extant buildings and archaeological discoveries. Ibn al-Jaṭīb refers to those in the northern part of the Vega de Granada as “majestic in size, extremely valuable, which only people close to royal power can afford”.

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Thirty of them were part of the sultan's private property; he had "magnificent houses, tall towers, wide fields, well-made dovecotes and henhouses".

The main and best-conserved is the farm of the Generalife, which Arabic sources call *Ānannat al' Arīf*, the Alarife farm. It is located on the hillside of the Cerro del Sol, next to the walls of the Alhambra; despite being very close to the palatine city, we should point out that it was functionally a very different space and independent from the Alhambra. It must have been created in the late 13th or early 14th century. Its palace presides an estate consisting of four market gardens (Colorada, Grande, Fuente Peña, and Mercería), which were watered from the Acequia Real. To raise the water to the highest level, an underground canal was dug which led to the bottom of a vertical well, where a waterwheel brought it up and deposited it in a reservoir, Albercón de las Damas. Despite multiple transformations after the conquest of 1492, the estate was continuously in use and retained most of its elements, including the agricultural areas.

Another important estate is known as Alcázar Genil (*Qaṣr al-Sayyid*). It was created in the early 13th century by the Almohad governor of Granada on the right bank of the river Genil. It remained important during the Nasrid period, attested by the fact that the still extant qubba of the palace dates from the reign of Isma'īl I or Yūsuf I. The almunia consisted of a series of pavilions and a large rectangular reservoir measuring 125 x 28 m. A small part of this reservoir was recently excavated and now forms part of the nearby metro station. Next to it, near the river, there is an extant ribat and a recently uncovered retaining wall: a very solid rammed earth, stone and mortar construction (*tapiería de cal y canto* technique) which allowed the market gardens to extend to the edge of the river. Another important almunia is now known as Cuarto Real de Santo Domingo, called in Arabic texts *Ānannat al-Manḡara al-Kubrā* (the large farm of Almajarra). All that remains are a garden area and a large tower which housed a richly decorated qubba built over the wall protecting the Alfareros district. Recent excavations have uncovered another residential area to the east of this estate. The tower presided over a courtyard, next to which there were farms, gardens and reservoirs, as well as other residential buildings. It must have been built during the reign of Muḡammad II (1273-1302), and thus is considered one of the essential sites when studying early Nasrid architecture. We know that by the end of the 15th century it belonged to the mother of Boabdil, the last sovereign of Granada. After the conquest it was donated to a

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religious order, the Orden de Predicadores, along with four more properties, for the foundation of the convent of Santa Cruz la Real.

The almunia of Alijares was built between 1375 and 1394 by the sultan Muḥammad V, who seems to have directly involved in planning it. It stood at the top of a hill looking over the valley of the river Genil and was accessed from the Alhambra via a paved path hedged with myrtle to a walled garden where tender plants were grown, with an octagonal pavilion surrounded by exotic Asian trees. It was destroyed by an earthquake in 1431, coinciding with the siege of Granada by the troops of John II of Castile. This wartime episode was depicted in the large wall painting of the Battle of La Higuera in the Monastery of San Lorenzo del Escorial, which shows this almunia with its wall as well as the city and the plain.

In the last stretch of the river Darro before it enters the Axares district, there are some market gardens, adjoining Cuesta del Chapiz slope, forming a landscape which is not too different from its medieval past. Here another great almunia was built, which occupied an extensive terrain on the hillside (2.58 hectares), organised in four large terraces, the lowest of which needed a substantial retaining wall over the course of the river Darro, similar to the one built in the Alcázar Genil so that the gardens could continue right up to the river's edge. On the top terrace, next to Guadix road - now Camino del Sacromonte- stood the palace, rebuilt by Lorenzo el Chapiz in the mid-16th century. On this level there are two ponds of different sizes, fed mainly by the Aynadamar canal, which irrigated the upper terrace, while the lower ones, closer to the Darro, were supplied directly by the Axares canal. The present building, restored by Leopoldo Torre Balbás, is still known as Casa del Chapiz, and in 1932 became the home of CSIC's Granada School of Arabic Studies.

As well as the five estates described here, there were others of similar importance, such as Dār al- 'Arūsa, Dār al-Wādī (Casa de las Gallinas), and Darabenaz. On the Vega plain there is still at least one large residential tower, known as El Fuerte, in the municipality of Las Gabias. Other smaller estates were distributed along the rivers Beiro, Genil, and Darro, and in the areas irrigated by the Aynadamar canal. Many of those mentioned were not royal properties but belonged to members of the upper classes. These estates seem to have been mainly devoted to agriculture, and any residential or leisure uses were secondary and insignificant.