

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 3

### 3.4. THE NASRID MADRASA OF GRANADA

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#### 1. STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONS ON THE ḤAMMĀMĀT

It was a December day in 1349. The students were inside the recently opened madrasa of Granada. From there, they could hear the voice of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer from the great mosque of the city, opposite their school. Inside, concentration reigned as they listened to their teacher. It was a space that enabled them to focus fully on their studies, as they would sleep in the same building during the course. When they stepped outside, life changed and became an explosion of noise and colour, as the Alcaicería market was close by, and merchants passed by with expensive perfumes and luxurious fabrics. The smell of spices flooded the narrow streets around the great mosque and its madrasa.

Only men could study there. Women were not allowed to attend classes in this space. Some women were able to receive higher education because their social status permitted it, and studied at home with a male or female teacher, usually separated from them by a curtain. The students had heard of learned women, because there were some very well-known ones at the time in Granada, such as Umm al-Ḥasan al-Ṭaṇyāliyya, better known as Umm al-Ḥasan, whose father was thought to have taught the celebrated poet and vizier Ibn al-Jaṭīb (1313-1374). She had studied medicine and was a distinguished poet, but could not teach at the madrasa because she was a woman.

A madrasa was a novelty in al-Andalus. One had previously opened in Malaga, but Granada's was the first official one. Until then, teaching had been outside the power and control of the authorities, something which had become widespread in other parts of the Muslim world, however, from its birthplace in Baghdad to its institutionalisation with the selḡuqī dynasty. It is true that the Marinid madrasa of Ceuta had opened a couple of years earlier, but this one in Granada was the first in

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al-Andalus and had been founded under Sultan Yūsuf I (1333-1354) this same year of 1349. The Sultan was already known as a great patron of the arts, and was currently immersed in building a beautiful palace with a tall tower which could be seen from the lower city, and which over time would come to be called Comares; and in the spring of the year the madrasa was opened, the majestic Bāb al-Šarīa or Puerta de la Justicia gate had been built at the Alhambra. People said that they studied at the madrasa Yūssifiyya, although in reality the real inspiration was the prime minister or ḥāyib Riḍwān al-Naṣrī, who had worked on this project for ten years until its official opening. Of course, without the sultan's support there would have been no money to sustain the school, provide student housing and pay for a permanent water supply. So calling the school Yūssifiyya recognised his patronage and thanked him for his generosity.

Before that time, education in al-Andalus took place in the mosques. But Granada was so large and advanced, with its many alhóndigas and its great hospital, that it was obvious a city of that economic and cultural level should have a madrasa. The students of the madrasa of Granada knew their situation was privileged, given that the institution offered them food and accommodation, and most of all, because their studies were planned: each professor had an assigned set of students and there was an established teaching period. In the mosques, everything was less systematic. The universities of other European cities, conceived as Christian institutions, corresponded to an economic and social system which was very different to al-Andalus. So the students were happy with this opportunity being given to them for the first time in Granada.

Their teachers were highly prestigious, and so they wanted to make the most of every moment and delve deep into their studies of law and religion, which was the specialist area of this centre of higher education. All the teachers were experts in a range of subjects, including knowledge of the Quran; in fact, some of them were preachers in the mosques of Granada. One of their teachers had died that year, and they missed him: Ibn Abī l-Ŷayš, an expert in succession law, but also in calculus and in Arabic philology. They all wanted to end up with the iŷāza, a certificate of learning in a given subject, which would qualify them to be teachers in turn. But for that, a period of hard work and dedication awaited.

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And so they spent hours studying and talking in the galleries around the courtyard, where there was a small reservoir. These galleries led to small rooms where they could study quietly, interrupted only by mandatory prayers in the well-kept oratory, full of lovely polychromed plasterwork, which illuminated them both physically, as the light shone through the octagonal trellis of the ceiling, and spiritually, as prayer became a guide in their lives. On the upper floor were additional rooms and bedrooms. Everything was well-organised in a tiny space, accessed through a beautiful white marble entrance inscribed with verses from the Quran and references to the founder Yūsuf I.

And in this building, in the heart of Nasrid Granada, their lives and thoughts were forged, unaware perhaps that where their madrasa stood there had once been an important 11th-century building from the Zirid period, and later, in the 13th century, a private home, amid a maze of alleys, workshops and shops. They knew that this was their house of science, and as the foundation stone said, a mansion of equity and light