

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 3

3.6. HOUSEHOLD ITEMS

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Traditionally, household items have been considered in isolation from the space where they were once used. It is true that today we see them in display cases or stored in museum holdings, far from the places where they had a function. For this reason, we think it important to relate household effects with the physical space, and specifically in this case, the domestic space of homes in the Granada of al-Andalus. It would be over-ambitious to examine the entire Andalusí period, as it covers several centuries, during which homes changed to reflect society and the groups living in them. Household goods also evolved as new technologies were introduced, with some becoming obsolete and disappearing while others entered everyday life for the first time. However, some aspects changed little, because essentially, basic household items meet fundamental needs such as preparing and storing food, or providing heat and shelter. There are many activities making up domestic life, each with its specific tools: trades performed in the home, games, personal hygiene, objects to delight the senses, etc.

Interpreting the records should enable us to detect habits and customs of everyday life, rather than merely listing objects. It is fundamental to relate household items with the physical space of the home, locating pieces in specific rooms, and paying attention to what might be elements that organised the space and the internal social hierarchy. For example, a simple curtain might be used to separate spaces; it might be fixed in place, or hung temporarily and then stored in a chest. This gives us an idea of the ephemeral nature of domestic spaces, rather than thinking of them as a static, fixed block. The frontiers were highly dynamic - simply laying out a mattress in a room made it a sleeping area, while leaning it against a wall or leaving it rolled up let the room take on other functions. Similarly, one could cook using a portable stove in different areas of the home.

This does not mean that all houses had only portable goods, or that rooms always had to have several different functions; this depended on the availability of space and the social rank of the inhabitants, but

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

it seems clear that household items had more versatile and multi-faceted functions than one would think when seeing them in a museum display case.

A home must be understood with objects that became protagonists of domesticity, which once were part of everyday life and today are cultural heritage pieces in a museum. They are authentic material documents of the uses and customs of an era, and the testimony left by the people who once lived in that home.

Our knowledge of the household items that furnished homes comes from different historical sources. On one hand, archaeology is undoubtedly a great source of information; on the other, written documents may include, for example, dowries and inventories. Although inventories appear very late in the Andalusí period, they provide data and descriptions of objects and their arrangement in the space which went back over time, so that documents written just after the conquest of Granada by the Christians give us fairly reliable clues to household items in the Nasrid period.

Furnishings could be very sparse. The floor would be covered with esparto mats, on which low tables were placed, surrounded by cushions stuffed with wool, leather stools, and wooden chests or trunks. Domestic utensils were set on shelves, which could be attached to a wall or form part of a cupboard. Lighting was essential, in the form of wax or tallow candles and metal or earthenware oil lamps. The most abundant household items, and the ones we know the most about, are undoubtedly those used for preparing and storing food; on one hand, thanks to archaeological finds, and on the other, because the forms and uses of these items have changed little over time. Directly relating to these utensils, we have culinary texts which inform us of the huge variety of containers and tools. An example is the *Kitâb al-tabîj*, an anonymous 13th-century Andalusí text which includes the following paragraph:

“...a mortar of white marble or wood, which must be a hardwood such as chestnut, terebinth, olive, ash, boxwood, or grapevine; prepared for pounding ingredients which should never be cut in copper [instruments], such as salt, garlic, fresh coriander, onion, mustard, mint, lemon balm and other plants, vegetables and fruit such as apple, quince, pomegranate, meat, fat, almonds, the stuffings prepared for

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

pastries, foods based on bread, and everything which will turn green, change and deteriorate if left in copper. This wood will be used for spoons and ladles. The wooden board used for cutting meat and rolling out pastry will be smooth and carefully polished. Similarly, the utensil for making mirkâs must be white glass or glazed ceramic or hardwood, because if it is copper the verdigris collects in the holes the meat is pushed through to make the stuffing, so the verdigris mixes with the meat and corrupts it, as I said.”

Every home would usually have a loom or a spindle, and spinning thread, sewing or cutting fabrics were part of everyday domestic activities. This is attested by the thimbles, pins and scissors which have come down to us. Charcoal burners were used to heat homes, and could be made of stone or earthenware.

Of course, we might expect to find many of these objects in other Andalusí contexts outside Granada. This is particularly true of the more basic items, as innovations were reserved for wealthier contexts, such as the Nasrid royal family and upper classes; this is the case for metallic glazed pottery, or the use of silk in certain textiles. But a detailed study of household items reveals small differences in the context of Granada, such as certain decorative motifs typical of the Nasrid period; or as an example, the *ataifor*, a type of plate already found from the 11th century, in 13th-14th century Granada evolves to be more slender, with higher, curvier sides and narrower edges. We find this type of distinguishing feature in jugs, lids, lanterns and cooking pots. Meanwhile, it is useful to know the volume and quantity of items found, and where they were discovered, as this tells us about the prevalence of certain activities in Granada compared to other places. Written sources must always be considered; for example, it is relevant to see mentions of the utensils used for raising silkworms, and the looms used for weaving silk, in Nasrid and Mudéjar Granada. But it is also true that an excavation can turn up a large amount of pottery tableware decorated with various motifs in blue on white and dated to around the 14th century, which shows us that this type of tableware was more common than others at this time, indicating changes in tastes and in potential purchasing power in the urban context of Granada. And of course, the technical differences, such as the use of certain minerals, the number of firings, the type of clay used in the piece... These can all differ due to socio-economic and cultural changes, which enables us to distinguish household items in Nasrid Granada from items from other times and places.

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

We can find examples of all these elements in the museums of Granada, more specifically the Archaeological Museum of Granada, and especially the Museum of the Alhambra, which has a vast collection going back to the earliest history of al-Andalus. They are both public institutions which, as well as conserving and explaining these items, are required to make them available for study.