

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 4

### 4.3. THE DEFENSIVE SYSTEM

By *Juan Antonio Vilar Sánchez*

Doctor in History

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The Alhambra was originally a small Muslim fortress (Hisn) built in the 9th century on Sabika Hill to complement the defences of the city of Granada. In 1238, the first Nasrid sultan, Muhammad I, modified this early fortress and created what was called the Alhizán or Alcazaba, making it his official residence. Since war and political instability were rife in this period, its military defence features continued to be the main elements, with royal areas being relegated to the background. However, with the passage of time, the military elements were gradually eclipsed by the beauty of the palaces (Dar al-Sultan).

The Alhambra fortress belongs to the group known as old fortresses, which are castles adapted to the orography of the terrain and located on top of hills, thus facilitating defence and visual control over the territory. Its walls were made of tapia (tabiyya).

The Alhambra's towers have different sizes, shapes, ornamentation and degrees of comfort, since they were built in different periods and for different purposes, during the growth of the monument's court areas and its medina, which lasted through the 14th century. We therefore find various types of towers in the walled area: flanking towers (Torre del Agua); storage and residential towers (Torre de la Vela and Torre del Homenaje); towers that housed entrance gates (Torre de la Justicia, Torre de Siete Suelos, Torre del Pico, Torre de Armas); palace towers or Qalahurras (Torre de la Cautiva and Torre de las Infantas); and the Qubba-towers, which house great halls (Torre de Comares and Torre de los Abencerrajes). The walls of the Alhambra were topped with ramparts that had merlons, embrasures and other types of openings designed for defence. Near strategic spots such as gates, bridges or especially vulnerable places countermures were built with barbicans protecting them, thus eliminating the need to dig trenches and the danger of using siege towers or similar machinery. However, the gates, as the

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

weakest points in the fortress, was where most defence elements were concentrated; doors armoured with large metal sheets, sophisticated locks and portcullis systems, and machicolations, from which to drop stones and other materials on attackers.

The steep slopes of Sabika Hill, the abundant water in the Alhambra – thanks to the long channel built in 1238 to bring water up from the Darro River - plus the numerous defence elements used in its construction, seemed to have made the complex inviolable in the Moorish period. Between 1238 and 1492 it was the last royal Muslim residence on Iberia and to its misfortune its military defences gradually became obsolete with the increasing use of incendiary projectiles in battles. The last Nasrid ruler surrendered to the Catholic Monarchs on 2 January 1492, and the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula was thus complete.

Shortly after their victory, the Catholic Monarchs transformed the fortress, adapting it to the new methods of warfare based on the use of artillery. Under the guidance of Ramiro López, the Alhambra was equipped with all the new poliorcetic (siege warfare) techniques of the so-called transition period: a series of artillery barriers, which gave rise to the first bastioned front in Spanish history, dry moats, thick walls with ramparts and machicolations, caponiers and other features, in addition to a powerful artillery train. Around 1495, the Alhambra was one of the castles best adapted for modern warfare in all of Europe.

The visit by Charles V to Granada in 1526, during his honeymoon with Isabella of Portugal, and his wish to build a royal residence in the Alhambra prompted the reinforcement of its walls, with the addition of refined antiartillery systems, valuable remains of which are the Adarve Nuevo (New Rampart) and the artillery fortifications built onto the Alcazaba. The old merlons were replaced by modern parapets made of stone from the nearby town of Alfacar.

Following the uprising of the Moriscos in 1568-1571 and their subsequent defeat and expulsion from the Kingdom of Granada, the Alhambra, now free of enemies and therefore also free of the need to defend itself, fell into a state of dormancy and abandonment that would persist until the beginning of the 19th century. Over that period of more than 200 years, activity focused mainly on conserving

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

and protecting what existed, keeping ruin at bay, and ensuring that the ring of walls remained complete and under control.

In the military realm, the Alhambra saw a short-lived rebirth with the Napoleonic invasion between 1810 and 1812. French troops reinforced the walls and their heights, using modern artillery batteries and making the Alhambra once again a fortress capable of resisting a modern siege. But on the 17th of September of 1812, as the French retreated, they blew up the innovative new batteries, along with numerous old Nasrid towers and surrounding buildings. The Alhambra became a military cadaver that needed over 100 years to come back to life. The invaluable work of the architects Mariano Contreras and Modesto Cendoya laid the foundations that later made it possible, in the times of Leopoldo Torres Balbás, to complete the ring wall around the complex.

Today the Alhambra's poliorcetic elements, despite the abundance of them throughout the monument and the fact that they provide wonderful observation points, are not well known and are very poorly preserved. Far from the tourist flows that seem to control everything, its bastions and walls sleep an unfair sleep and remain standing thanks only to their most intrinsic trait; they are strong, so strong they withstand everything, even bombs.