

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 4

4.6. THE BATHS OF ALHAMBRA

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In the medina part of the Alhambra, and also in the almunias (gardens devoted to horticulture and also recreational use) and the palaces around it, just as in other cities of Al-Andalus, there are numerous ḥamāmat (ḥammam), or baths, both public and private. The Alhambra's public baths are in the Alcazaba and next to the main mosque; the former was for soldiers and the latter for members of the Nasrid court. Private baths, the vast majority, were an essential feature of the multiple palaces comprising the Alhambra. Within the Alcazaba madīnat al- Ḥamrā' there is the aforementioned public bath and also a small private bath belonging to the large house in the Plaza de Armas, the military quarter, which may have belonged initially to Muḥammad I (1238-1273) and subsequently to the chief of guards. In the palatial area, during the reign of Muḥammad II (1273-1303) baths were built in the Palacio del Partal Alto, in the Palacio de los Abencerrajes, in the former convent of San Francisco and in the almunia of the Generalife (ʿyannat al-ʿArīf). Under Muḥammad III (1303-1309) the public baths at the main mosque were built as a means of income for the mosque, the construction being a gift to the community by pious citizens. Sultan Yūsuf I (1333-1354) ordered the construction of the royal baths of the Palacio de Comares, and also the baths of Dār al-ʿArūsa (Palace of the Bride), located on the adjacent hill, the Cerro del Sol.

The Arab bath, or ḥammām, was similar in its basic structure to the Roman thermae, or bath- houses. It received water from a channel and/or an underground cistern, which provided the abundant flow of water needed. It generally had a series of rooms such as the receiving room, which was for dressing and undressing (al-bayt al-maslaj) and was sometimes used after bathing as a place for resting and socializing. In this area there is always a toilet (al-bayt al- mā'), which is the Arabic term for "water room", because, following the Turkish design, it consisted of an elongated hole with running water that carried away the waste. Next was the cold room (al-bayt al-bārid), and immediately after that the warm room (al-bayt al-waṣṭanī), which literally means "intermediate". This room was the largest. Finally,

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bathers entered the hot room (al-bayt al-sājun) which had one or two basins full of water heated by the boiler (al-burma) hidden in the service area. The service area also had an underground section (al-furn), “oven”, where a wood fire burned to heat the floor of the hot room, which was raised and supported by pillars. There was also a service stairwell used by the bath workers to access the vaulted ceilings of the rooms. The heat transmitted by the furnace, in the classic hypocaust method, to the floor of the hot room and from there to the warm room was the basis of the steam, as water poured onto the hot surfaces evaporated. The users of the baths were nude except for the clogs they wore to avoid burning their feet where the floor was hot. To control the density of the steam the bath workers opened and closed the panes of the star-shaped skylights (maḍāwī or kuwā) found in the vaults. The panes were of different colours, like the red ones mentioned in the poetry of Ibn Šuhayd, who worked in the Almería taifa.

Men and women took turns using the ḥammām: men in the morning and women in the afternoon. The baths were run, cared for and cleaned by a number of guards and young servants (ṭayyab), many of whom were slaves. There were also masseurs (ḥakkak) and cosmeticians (māšīṭa) who used musk, henna and kohl to adorn women for feast days and important ceremonies.

The ḥamāmat had multiple values and uses: the primary use was hygiene; a second use was the ritual bath that believers (muslimīn) took for purification after important festivities, such as the ending of the fast (ʿīd al-fiṭr). It is worth remembering that the obligatory ablutions (al-wūdū) were performed elsewhere, in the fountains or midaa of the courtyards located in the mosques; a third use would have been therapeutic, through hydrotherapy, although this was less frequent in ḥammām than in the ḥamma, the natural baths springing from thermal waters rich in curative properties, which are the origin of many of the place names in Granada (Alhama de Granada, a nearby town, is a reference to these springs). The fourth use was the quest for physical pleasure, an essential element of Islamic hedonism and one that appears frequently in Andalusí poetry. Ibn Baqī wrote a poem about the sensual delight produced in our body by the contrast between the cold and the heat in the various rooms of the ḥammām, although Ibn al-Zaqqāq went further and compared the effect of the bath to the sexual act. Ibn Zaydūn wrote that some baths in Al-Andalus were decorated with suggestive marble figures of nude women, called šuwar al-ḥammām. These statues probably dated from the Roman era and were

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being re-used in the Arab baths. The last use would be as a meeting place where people could chat about political issues or everyday life, as occurred in the baths of the Palacio de Comares, in the renowned Sala de las Camas (Hall of the Beds). More specifically and in relation to women, the ḥammām was one of the few public spaces where women could meet and do as they pleased.

The baths in the Alhambra are similar to those found in Granada and other cities of Al- Andalus. There are two basic types. One is seen in the Alcazaba's public ḥammām, of Ziri origin, which dates from the 11th century. It has a large aljibe, or cistern, adjacent to it and a series of parallel rooms, following the layout of the Caliphal baths of the Alcázar of Córdoba (10th century). The other is a glorified version, present in the private baths of the Palacio de Comares, in which the al-bayt al-maslaj or receiving room has a lantern structure built on top and is given a greater role as a meeting place, and the al-bayt al-waṣṭanī, the warm room, is larger and more complex, divided by arched porticoes with columns, like the Caliphal baths of the Alcázar of Córdoba. This new typology begins to be used during the reign of Yūsuf I according to the poem by the vizier Ibn al-Ķayyāb that appears on one of the basins in the hot room. From that time forward, a lantern was added to the receiving room of some pre- existing baths, like the ones in the Palacio de los Abencerrajes, which had been built during the reign of Muḥammad II, or the ones in the main mosque, from the reign of Muḥammad III. The new baths, like the ones in Dār al-ʿArūsa, were built directly with the lantern structure. Apart from these baths with regular layouts, others, with irregular floor plans, were also built during the reign of Muḥammad II, such as the ones found in the palaces of the Partal Alto, of the Abencerrajes and of the former convent of San Francisco.