

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

MODULE 4

4.7. RELIGIOUS SPACES

By *Virgilio Martínez Enamorado*

School of Araba Studies (Spanish National Research Council, CSIC)

It is well known that in Dār al-Islām ('House of Islam') religion is present in all public and private spaces. Naturally the Alhambra is no exception to this rule. As the construction of a Muslim dynasty, it is a religious space in itself and is filled with Koranic allusions in the form of epigraphy and symbology. Similarly, a direct allusion to the Muslim religion is found in the words appearing hundreds of times throughout the building, *la gālib illā Allāh* ('there is no conqueror but Allah'), the dynastic motto of the Nasrids (*gāliba*). In fact, the entire Alhambra can be considered a big religious complex because everything in it seeks to meet the parameters of a container of references to the Muslim creed: from the Puerta de la Justicia, or Gate of Justice (*Bāb al-Šarīf*) to the baths (*hammāmāt*), from the Throne Room in the Palace of Comares, which represents a sophisticated allegory of the Prophet Muhammad's rise to the heavens, to the doxological phrases (*azoras* and *aleyas*, verses and chapters of the Koran) and the poetry appearing on walls all over the complex.

The religious manifestation par excellence is the mosque. Several oratories, of varying dimensions and architectural conceptualizations, are found throughout the Alhambra. Since it was a fully functional *madīna* ('city') from the 13th century onwards, the urban canon in place, the same as in other Muslim cities, set up a hierarchy in the functioning of the mosques. There was a main mosque or *Aljama* Mosque (*Mas̄yid al- Ŷāmi'*), where the Friday sermon (*khutba*) was delivered, and a number of secondary mosques, oratories integrated into the palace premises and used by the sultans and by their royal entourage.

The main mosque of the Alhambra is thus an expression of the public sphere of the complex, which combines this public function with its exclusively private function as a residence of the sultans. The mosque occupied a central position in the monument, being almost equidistant between the Torre de la Vela and the Torre del Agua. It was situated on the plot now occupied by the Santa María de la

The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

Alhambra Church, which was built between 1585 and 1618 over the mosque's ruins, since it had been torn down in 1576. Between the conquest of Granada by the Catholic Monarchs and the year 1576, the temple was consecrated as the cathedral of the Alhambra. It was not very large: it had three naves and a projecting mihrab. The construction of the Friday Mosque was undertaken by Sultan Muhammad III (1302-1308). It was built along with a hammam, which was excavated in the 1930s. It was here in the mosque that Sultan Yūsuf I was assassinated in 1354, as he prayed. Very little remains of the building, only a lamp bearing the name of the ruler who ordered its construction, Muhammad III (1305), and the carved fountain in the courtyard, used as a baptismal font after the arrival of the Christians.

The other mosques (three are preserved) were of course smaller than the main one. They are found in different part of the palace. To a large extent, they are to be considered private oratories for the sultans, which would explain their reduced size.

In the space west of the Mexuar stands a mosque that is singular because of its location, above the ramparts and with magnificent views over the Albaycín. Originally, the access to this oratory was through the Machuca gallery. The floor was lowered in the 20th century. The room was damaged by a gunpowder explosion (1590) and remained in ruins until its restoration in 1917. According to Ibn al-Jatib, it was a "badly decorated" project by Abū l- Walid. It was thoroughly remodelled by Muhammad V, when he made it part of the palace during the construction of the new Mexuar (starting in 1363).

Next to the Sala de la Barca (Hall of the Ship), Yūsuf I had a small mosque or oratory (2.37 x 1.75 m), built, which in practice is only big enough for one person at a time: it has a narrow prayer room dominated by a mihrāb disproportionately large for such a small space. Inside the niche, a large scallop shell is prominent.

At one end of the Palacio del Partal (Bartāl, 'portico' in Arabic), Yūsuf I built a mosque (4.16 x 3 m) on the fortification's ramparts, with two distinct areas separated by a transversal semicircular arch: a vestibule and the oratory itself, with a beautiful mihrāb. Two small arches with mullions, both framed by another, larger arch, are found in the two lateral walls, the one to the right of the entrance thus has an excellent view. The oratory is magnificently decorated.