

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 4

### 4.8. THE SERVICES BUILDINGS

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The Alhambra medina would have comprised, in the Nasrid period, the largest population of service sector workers in the palatine city: a working class neighbourhood in comparison with the other districts of larger and more decorated buildings. The remains of a few medieval houses, workshops and streets are still present, discovered thanks to the archaeological explorations performed sporadically during the 20th century. The adaptations made after the Christian conquest gradually transformed this area, masking it with edifications used for different purposes and a population having a different culture, so it ended up losing its medieval appearance almost entirely.

Practically all of the Upper Alhambra entered the second half of the 19th century in an advanced state of abandonment, with the appearance of a wasteland, as a result of the explosions set off by the Napoleonic army as it retreated in 1812. It thus became known as the Secano, or the Dryland.

About one third into the 20th century began a process involving archaeological excavations, the reinforcement of ruins and the re-planting of gardens. This process continued through the 1960s, when this area was used to connect the Alhambra proper to the Generalife. Among the fragments of pavements, channels and walls, it was possible to identify some structures.

Along with the gardens and paths of the Upper Alhambra, archaeological remains are found throughout the Secano area, including elements belonging to the hydraulic infrastructure, the Acequia del Sultán, also known as the Acequia Real: anchors for waterwheels, tanks for storing water and a large aqueduct, now partially rebuilt, are evidence of a small but probably very active manufacturing sector at the service of the court, concentrated in the higher sections of the palatine city. At the eastern end of the complex is precisely where the acequia entered the Alhambra: a distributor that has partially conserved its original form, despite the damage done by Napoleon's troops, and which is protected by the Torre del Agua (Water Tower).

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The vestiges of the Nasrid period are concealed amongst walls that are similar but that date from a later era, which indicates that Nasrid constructions were re-used in Christian times; part of the ovens and the hydraulic structures seen in the gardens might belong to the period following the Christian conquest or have been reused at that time.

In the medina's central, higher level, parts of a building have been emptied of rubble and because of its size it is believed to have been an important residence, perhaps a palace. Its central core is a large alberca, or pool, in the middle of a long courtyard with various rooms around it. A pergola, situated above the level where the remnants of walls are found, points to the possibility of a perpendicular corridor or street, where the building's access would have been. By the pergola are the foundations of a portico or pavilion projecting out into the courtyard. At the other end of the pool various segments of wall ruins indicate the presence of a hammam or bath.

To the east, at a somewhat lower level, the structure of a medieval tannery was recovered in the 1930s. In this building leather was tanned for various uses, a common trade in Al- Andalus. The remains of the Alhambra's tannery suggest that it was smaller than tanneries in North Africa: the craft trades located in this section of the Alhambra worked only for the sultan's court. The tannery was situated next to the Acequia Real to benefit from its intense flow of water, essential in tanning. A courtyard, with various rooms around it, was in the middle of the building, which had two galleries built on brick pillars. Various tanks of different size and depth and two huge earthenware jugs constitute the elements necessary for submerging and tanning the leather. On the ground observers will see various holes that distributed the water to the tanks, which still have their pipes and drains. Around them are other service rooms, including a latrine, and other constructions, which may be from a later date.

In addition to this tannery, various pottery industries have been identified, thanks to the remnants of muffles and kilns, as well as other buildings that seem to have been used as warehouses or workshops. Such was probably the use given to the dozen or so silos/dungeons that have been identified in this area. It is interesting to note that the Arabic name for the closest gate is Báb al-Gudúr (Gate of the Wells or of the Pools).

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With respect to the small workshops serving the courts, it is worth remembering that silk was very important in the Granada of the Nasrids, and there was very likely a workshop for the manufacture of silk exclusively for the palace. Also worth mentioning is the possibility of a Nasrid mint being located in this sector: among the remains of the Palacio de los Abencerrajes, evidence has been found pointing to the minting of coins in the period of Philip IV, information that is reinforced by the existence of at least one coin, which is of questionable composition due to the instability of the period in which it was minted, probably during the reign of Muhammad XIII. The coin reads “bi-hamrá’ Garnata”, that is, “in the Alhambra of Granada”. This coin is now on display at the Alhambra Museum.