

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

## MODULE 6

### 6.7. DAILY LIFE IN THE MEDINA

By *Silvia Pérez López*

Board of Trustees of the Alhambra and the Generalife

---

The Alhambra is a palatine city, conceived and built for use by government officials and civil servants. Its urban structure developed over the two and a half centuries that it existed. Serving the court was the population that lived in the medina, which was organized around a main street and had a hammam, a mosque, businesses, houses... In other words, it had everything it needed for daily life. In the highest section, a neighbourhood of artisans was formed, with a maza of houses and workshops similar to the ones found in North Africa. Only a few archeological remains of it still exist. Among these remains were two houses, near the Captain's Tower, which Leopoldo Torres Balbás excavated and restored in his day. Both are typical Nasrid homes.

The house's general conception was based on family relationships. The space looked towards the interior, with a clear separation from the exterior, few openings to the outside and with transit rooms. Inside, the elements comprising the house were arranged around a central courtyard, which was a defining element of any home and the main axis of family life. The courtyard and the street were linked by means of a zaguán, a room that was usually small and served to connect the street to the courtyard, but emphasizing the separation between the two worlds, private and public. The other parts of the house opened onto the courtyard, which thus became the main axis of the house, since it organized and centred family relationships, being the central gathering area and the place where many daily activities were performed. The rooms or alcoves were the most cared-for spaces in the house. They open onto the courtyard and have multiple uses: they serve as a place for gathering, eating, sleeping and even working. The kitchen, in most cases, is nothing but a small stove made of clay.

It is clear that the social function of the houses, where the family and private life of its inhabitants took place, was guided by essential Islamic principles, which valued an inward-oriented ambience that was shaped by the central courtyard, where the life of men, women and children took place. Space was used flexibly, as reflected in the absence of large pieces of furniture, and in

# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

general a preference for limited furnishings that did not weigh much and were easy to move around: some trunks for clothes, places to sleep, mats... The Nasrids frequently used built-in structures such as small niches or cupboards in the walls, to make up for the lack of furniture and which were used to store household objects and linens. Such household objects had a primary role and shaped domestic life a great deal. We will stop to look at some of the items present in household supplies, a topic closely related to the world of women but not exclusively.

Household items can be classified according to their use and form part of a specific area of the house. First there would be the items related to the “kitchen”. These were varied pieces of ceramics that generally had no decoration: pots and pans, lids, plates, cups, jars, etc., that were perhaps used for both cooking and for storing food, and even perhaps for eating the food directly from them.

Other pieces would be those related to the transport and storage of water and other liquids: cántaros, tinajas, lebrillos... Having water available was indispensable and this explains the high number of items used for transport, such as cántaros, or large jugs, and for storage inside the home, such as tinajas, or vats. The lebrillos would also have been used for washing clothes.

Another very large group of ceramic items with diverse shapes is the series of objects used for holding liquids or foods and could be used both in the kitchen and in other parts of the house: jugs, bottles, flasks and redomas (small container with a wide base that grows narrower towards the top, where the spout is), among others. To light the home oil lamps were used; they were pointed at the front, in the back they had a handle and they could be suspended.

The Alhambra has a great variety of objects that teach us about daily life and that are on display at the Museum of the Alhambra, where we can contemplate objects that were once part of the home but were found during excavations taking place in the monument. We have selected a few items from the collection, attending to their use and their presumable location in the house.

We will begin with the large, important pieces known as tinajas, the container par excellence for storing liquids or grains, essential in the household, generally unmovable and at the same time decorative. These large containers generally had stamped decoration based on symbols, with a clearly protective function. The vats were placed on cylindrical pieces or “reposaderos”, that had only one purpose: to



# The Alhambra and Granada in the al-Andalus

support the vat and collect the water exuding from it, for which it was equipped with a platform and a pouring spout.

The flask, in contrast with the preceding items, is small and transportable, although it has the same purpose. It is for storing liquids. We mention this object because it appears in the drawing on a zafa, a cup-shaped item that has a large diameter and is not very deep. The zafa is a green-glazed ceramic serving dish decorated with stylized figures painted in manganese. The centre of the container has the following scene: two figures of indeterminate sex dressed in the classic Muslim outfit, a striped tunic, and carrying in their hands objects like the ones seen in the Museum. These everyday objects appear here with foliage motifs to decorate the dish.

Finally, there is no such thing as a society without children. The children of the 14th and 15th centuries played and they did so with little things that looked like household items, objects very much like the ones their mothers used every day.