



*In the Intimacy of the Dār al-Nisā’:  
The Residential Spaces of the Nasrid  
Sultanas at the Alhambra of Granada  
(Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries)*

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**In the Intimacy of the *Dār al-Nisā'*: The Residential Spaces of the Nasrid Sultanas at the Alhambra of Granada (Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries)**

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**Abstract:** Like many other dynasties in the History of Islam in the Middle Ages, the Banū Naṣr (1232-1492) created their own palaces as both their seat of power and royal residence at the Alhambra in Granada, the city chosen as the capital of their kingdom in 1238. During its long building process, which lasted from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, the Alhambra became the dwelling of the different members of the Nasrid family, including not only the men but also the many women who made up the harem of this dynasty. This article aims to identify the residential spaces in the Alhambra where the daily life of the women of the Nasrid dynasty took place. To start with, we will reflect on the feminine nature of the Alhambra and the concept of the harem in this final phase of Andalusī history, also analysing the composition of the household of the Nasrid sultanas. We will then try to locate the specific areas of the Alhambra where the *Dār al-nisā'* (or “house of women”) may have been located, gathering the sparse textual anecdotes reflecting the presence of women in different parts of this royal palace and resorting to personal interpretations due this scarcity of textual sources. For this, we will revisit the available Arabic sources and material culture from a gender perspective. With this study, we aim to turn the Alhambra into an academic field of debate and reflection on how the segregation of spaces according to gender category was organized in the context of both Islamic society and architecture.

**Keywords:** Queenship; Women; Sultanas; Alhambra; Nasrid kingdom of Granada; Household; Gender studies.

## The Female Component of Islamic Architecture: A Brief Introduction

In the thirteenth century, before the formation of the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada, Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 638/1240), a celebrated Sufi author from Murcia, expressed his personal concept of architecture in one of his works: “Any place not feminized is dispensable.”<sup>1</sup> This brief declaration encapsulates both the conceptualization and function of the unquestionable female component of Islamic architecture. Although this spiritual master left al-Andalus around 596 (1199-1200) and finally settled down in the Islamic East, the architectural expressions developed under the rule of the Nasrid dynasty (1232-1492) following his departure silently maintained this feminine character. The most exponential artistic creation of this lineage, the Alhambra, actually displayed a supremely feminine aesthetic in very different ways. Some of the epigraphic verses that embellished the walls of this monument expressed this as a woman perfectly adorned like a bride expecting the arrival of her groom, the sultan. One of the most eloquent verses of this type are those engraved in the right-hand niche (*tāqa*) at the entrance of the Hall of the Boat, which were composed by Nasrid poet Ibn Zamrak (d. after 797/after 1395), which read:

I, beautiful and perfect,  
am the chair in which the bride is presented.  
Look at the vase and you will know  
how true my words are.  
Then look at my crown  
and you will see it as the crescent moon.  
May Ibn Naṣr, bright  
and beautiful sun of the kingdom,  
remain in this high position

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<sup>1</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, “*Risāla [mā] lā yu 'awal 'alay-hi* (Treatise on what is disposable),” in M. Shihāb al-Dīn al-'Arabī, ed., *Rasā'il Ibn 'Arabī* (Beirut: 1997), 255, *apud* José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *La poética del agua en el Islam* (Pontevedra: Trea, 2011).

safe from the coming of dusk.<sup>2</sup>

These verses reflect the femininity of the Alhambra, which can be interpreted as a metaphorical resource aiming to strengthen both palace's beauty and the virile, masculine, and heroic image of the Nasrid emir who built the space in which these lines were reproduced.

The ancient phenomenon of feminization of spaces was also a feature of the description of old cities and was defined as the nuptial essence of Islamic architecture by the eminent academic José Miguel Puerta Vilchez.<sup>3</sup> Granada, chosen as the capital of the Nasrid kingdom in the Islamic year 635 (1238), was also likened to a beautiful woman in several Arabic texts. For instance, Maghribian traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (d. 770/1368-1369) defined the city of *Gharnāṭa* as “the metropolis of al-Andalus and *the bride of its cities* (*qā'idat bilād al-Andalus wa-'arūs muduni-hā*).<sup>4</sup>” Nasrid poet Ibn Zamrak, mentioned above, also described Granada as follows:

Stop at the Sabika esplanade and look around you:

*the city is a lady whose husband is the mountain (...)*

The Sabika [hill] is a crown on the forehead of Granada,  
in which the stars would like to encrust themselves.

And the Alhambra (May God safeguard it!)  
is a ruby on top of that crown.<sup>5</sup>

However, as well as this symbolic female facet of the Alhambra, this royal palace was also the residence of the Nasrid dynasty, inhabited by many women from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. On the following pages, we will try to identify the main residential areas of the Alhambra from the perspective of gender applied to the interpretation of the information provided by Arabic and Christian sources. However, as we will notice, the scarcity of textual references to Nasrid royal women inhabiting

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<sup>2</sup> José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Reading the Alhambra: A visual guide to the Alhambra through its inscriptions*. Trans. Jon Trout (Granada: Edilux, 2011), 107.

<sup>3</sup> José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Los códigos de utopía de la Alhambra* (Granada: Diputación Provincial de Granada, 1990), 148–154.

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, *Tuḥfat al-nuẓẓār fī gharā'ib al-amṣār wa-'ajā'ib al-asfār*, ed. 'Alī al-Muntaṣir al-Kattānī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1979), 2:768.

<sup>5</sup> Ibn Zamrak, *Dīwān Ibn Zamrak al-Andalusī*. Ed. Muḥammad Tawfiq al-Nayfar (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1997), *appendix*, 499–506 (poem n° 99).

specific spaces of this palace—due to the rigorous zeal of Arabic historiography to protect the integrity of upper-class women, considered “sacred” or *ḥurma*—will lead us to draw frequent hypothesis and suppositions of where the female daily life was developed inside of the Alhambra. Therefore, we will base our study—approached as a first approximation to the subject—on the sparse textual anecdotes reflecting the presence of women in different parts of this royal palace and resorting to personal interpretations due to this scarcity of textual information, as well as to the analysis of architecture and preserved material culture.

### **On the concept of harem within the Nasrid dynasty. The Female Occupants of the Alhambra**

As in the rest of the Islamic dynasties in the Middle Ages, the emirs of the Banū Naṣr benefited from the legal interpretation of several verses of the Koran, which allowed them to marry up to four wives (*zawjāt*) legally and to take as many concubines (*ummahāt al-awlād*, literally “the mothers of the children”) as they wished. According to Medieval Arabic sources, the Nasrid harem was therefore made up of two classical socio-legal categories of women. The first, the legal wives, were generally the paternal cousins or maternal cousins (*bint al-'amm/khāl*) of the different emirs and were considered “noble” (*ḥurra*, pl. *ḥarā'ir*) from birth as they were members of the Nasrid family, while the second class, the concubines, within the Nasrid context, were generally Christian slaves (*rūmiyyāt*) brought from the Christian parts of the Iberian Peninsula. The different features characterizing these slave women took Nasrid vizier and secretary, Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 776/1374), to describe them as having “diaphanous whiteness, movable breasts, thin bodies, balanced fat, superb flesh in a narrow build of brocades, bodies and backs embellished with beautiful jewels and gorgeous beads; they stand out for the peculiarity of being foreign and for how they blandish.”<sup>6</sup>

There were significant legal and social differences between these two categories of women, which should be analysed. As “free” (*ḥurra*, pl. *ḥarā'ir*), in the sense of “noble” from birth, the legitimate wives (*zawjāt*) enjoyed all the rights that Islamic Law recognized for its female subjects. On the contrary, enslaved women did not have those privileges until they gave birth to a descendent—preferably, a son—for the emir; this situation automatically turned them *ipso jure* into *ummahāt al-awlād* (plural of *umm al-*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Kitāb al-wuṣūl fī ḥifẓ al-ṣiḥḥa fī l-fuṣūl*, ed. and trans. Concepción Vázquez de Benito, *Libro de higiene* (Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1984), 70 (Arabic text).

*walad*—literally “the mother of the son”). Maternity was, therefore, the vehicle for these Christian women to improve their social and legal situation within the feminine microcosm of the harem and the dynasty itself, reaching through it both the very same status of *ḥarā'ir* (plural of *ḥurra*) and the same legal rights of the legitimate women.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of their different socio-legal categories, all of these women were fundamental to the perpetuation of the Nasrid lineage, as they were part of the harem (*ḥarīm* or *ḥuram* in Arabic). This term was used in the Arabic language to describe both the group of women who belonged to the family of a man and were considered “prohibited” (*ḥarām*) to men other than their husbands and also the private area of the family’s household which they inhabited, where any other man was not allowed to access.<sup>8</sup> The best definition of the harem in Nasrid times can be found in Ibn al-Khaṭīb’s political treatise, *Maqāma fī l-siyāsa* (“Session on Politics”), dedicated to his master Sultan Muḥammad V (755-760/1354-1359; 763-793/1362-1391) as a manual of practical pieces of advice about how to rule. In this regard, we should not forget that women—both legitimate wives and concubines—were fundamentally means of reproduction and, as such, their presence in the Alhambra was essential to the perpetuation of the Nasrid dynasty, as the beginning of the chapter devoted to the harem exposes:<sup>9</sup>

[As for the wives,], they are the ground where the children are planted, the myrtles of the spirit, and the repose of both the heart — exhausted by the thoughts — and the soul — split by the self-esteem to the point of intrigues and censure. Search amongst them for a [woman] who exceeds the others for her kindly character and who seems haughty regardless of her position, to be the mother of your children, as long as this behaviour does not harm your spirit ...

The coexistence of legal wives and concubines in the palaces of the Alhambra was presumably very problematic. Their legal inferiority led the Christian concubines, from the time of their arrival in the harem, to struggle to climb the social pyramid of this

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<sup>7</sup> J. Schacht, “Umm al-Walad,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2000), 10:857–859.

<sup>8</sup> Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las sultanas de la Alhambra. Las grandes desconocidas del reino nazarí de Granada (siglos XIII-XV)*, (Granada: Comares-Patronato de la Alhambra, 2013), 165–166.

<sup>9</sup> This fragment, which Ibn al-Khaṭīb initially offered in his work *Maqāma fī l-siyāsa*, was also reproduced by the author in his *Iḥāṭa* (vol. IV, 625–626) and, later on, by al-Maqqarī in his celebrated *Nafh al-tīb min ghun al-Andalus al-ratīb wa-dhikr wazīri-hā Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb*, ed. Iḥsān ‘Abbās (Beyrut: Dār Ṣādir, 1968), 4:439–440.

female microcosm. They could accomplish this goal by motherhood. Indeed, by begetting a son for the emir, these concubines achieved freedom at the hands of their master, the sultan, and with this, the same free status of *ḥurra* as the legitimate wives. Despite this legal equality that motherhood conferred on concubines, the difference between them and legitimate wives was also marked by their names: we shall see that free noble women by birth received the proper names of great women from the history of Islam, that is, from the family and social environment of the Prophet Mohammed (Fāṭima, 'Ā'isha, Mu'mina, Maryam, Khadīja or Zaynab). In contrast, the enslaved women's names were always metaphorical, denoting beauty and pleasure, including names of animals, atmospheric or astronomical phenomena, precious materials, physical or moral qualities, or abstract concepts such as *Shams* ("Sun"), *Shams al-Ḍuḥā* ("Morning Sun"), *Qamar* ("Moon"), *Buthayna* ("Small fertile plain"), *Zahar al-Riyāḍ* ("Flower of the Gardens"), *Bihār* ("Rush"), *Rīm* ("White Gazelle"), *'Alwa* ("Dawn," "White"?), and *Thurayyā'* or *Soraya* ("Pleiad").<sup>10</sup>

The greater or lesser size of the harem was a clear sign of the greater or lesser power achieved by the Nasrid dynasty. According to the Maghribian chronicler Ibn Khaldūn (d. 784/1382), "luxury strengthens the power of a dynasty," so that the women of the harem (and especially the concubines) are the best indication of the economic splendour achieved by a lineage.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the Nasrid dynasty, the harem was not really very extensive. In fact, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, the Nasrid family tree was made up of at least thirty-six noble women—at least twenty-three of these were legal wives (*zawjāt*) of different Nasrid emirs—and nine Christian concubines (*ummahāt al-awlād*) documented in the Arabic sources. However, these numbers are not definitive as there were surely more women whose existence has not transcended in the texts. None of the Nasrid emirs took, simultaneously, more than one legal wife and two or three concubines at most. This may be due to the frequent use of a marriage contract of the Qairaouani type in Nasrid Granada, according to which women could prohibit their

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<sup>10</sup> On the different kinds of names attributed to Andalusī slave women, see the great analysis and categorization conducted by Manuela Marín, *Mujeres en al-Andalus* (Madrid: CSIC, 2000), 65-70. As for the analysis of the different names borne by the women of the Nasrid dynasty, see Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las sultanas de la Alhambra*, 137-165.

<sup>11</sup> María Jesús Viguera, "A Borrowed Space: Andalusī and Maghribī Women in Chroniclers," in *Writing the Feminine: Women in Arabic Sources*, ed. Manuela Marín (Londres-Nueva York: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2002), 173.

husbands from taking a second wife.<sup>12</sup> The reigns in which the harem seemed to have been larger were those of Emir Ismā'īl I (713-725/1314-1325)—who took three Christian concubines—and Yūsuf I (733-755/1333-1354)—who married a legitimate wife and took two concubines, also of Christian origin.<sup>13</sup> It is no coincidence that both reigns took place in times of the economic splendour of the Nasrid dynasty, in the fourteenth century.



**Figure 1. Nasrid Women singing and playing instruments. Manuel López Vázquez, *Reinterpretación de las pinturas del Partal* (2019). Museum of the Alhambra**

As sultanas, both legal wives and concubines were served in their daily life by black slave women from *Bilād al-Sūdān* (“the country of black people”). These women, mentioned in the texts as *mamlūka* (“owned” thing or person, that is to say, slave) and *raqīqa* (“slave”), were considered second—or even third-class—people as they were cheap merchandise. Thus, these women were deprived of all social consideration and effectively became victims of double marginalization due to race and gender differences. Sudanese slave women were employed solely for domestic service since they seemed renowned for

<sup>12</sup> On this type of marriage contract, see the study by Dalenda Larguèche, *Monogamie en Islam. L'exception Kairouaïse* (Tunisia: Centre de Publication Universitaire–Laboratoire des Ressources Patrimoniales de Tunisie, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las sultanas de la Alhambra*, 74.



their cooking, a skill that could significantly increase their worth. However, they must have worked at the Alhambra mainly as housekeepers for the women of the harem (*qahramānāt*), being responsible, as happened in the palaces of the Umayyads of Cordova, for keeping the expensive clothes, jewellery, and perfumes of the Nasrid sultanas, which were also under their guard because of their great value.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, these black women may have been entrusted with the custody of the *duwayra*, literally the “small room” where the most valuable perfumes were stored in the Alhambra, located close to the modern Mexuar hall. It is therefore not unreasonable to think that these women could also have been in charge of safekeeping the most expensive dresses of the sultanas. Apart from these tasks, these black slaves very likely served the Nasrid royal women as midwives (given the need to attend to the sultanas in childbirth and ensure the safe arrival of the children of the emirs) and even nurses (as ill women could only be medically treated by other women) and wet-nurses, a very common figure in upper-class Muslim families.

Several Arabic texts mention the presence of Sudanese black slave women in the household of the sultanas in the Alhambra as both domestic and personal servants of both the Nasrid sultans and sultanas. For instance, the marriage contract of princess ‘Amat al-‘Azīz (granddaughter of Emir Muḥammad I) and a member of the Banū Ḥudayr family from Crevillente (Alicante), drawn up in the thirteenth century by the secretary of the Nasrid chancery Ibn Khaṭṭāb al-Mursī (d. 686/1287), reveals that this princess received twenty black female slaves from Sudan (*‘ishrūna mamlūka min raqīq al-Sūdān*) as part of her dowry.<sup>15</sup> Another anecdote further supports the existence of black slave women in the Alhambra for that purpose in the fourteenth century. Although the Nasrid sources offer the official version of the murder of Emir Yūsuf I (which took place on 1 *shawwāl* 755/19 October 1354) as perpetrated by a madman who leaped on the sultan brandishing a knife that he had previously sharpened when the sovereign was reciting the fast-breaking feast prayer at the Great Mosque of the Alhambra, Ibn Khaldūn adds interesting details to this account. According to him, the person who assassinated Yūsuf I was “a black idiot, who worked in the Nasrid stables and was born of one of the black

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<sup>14</sup> Manuela Marín, *Mujeres en al-Andalus*, 65–70. As for the analysis of the different names borne by the women of the Nasrid dynasty, see Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las sultanas de la Alhambra*, 137–165.

<sup>15</sup> Ibn Khaṭṭāb, *Faṣl al-khiṭāb fī tarsīl Abī Bakr Ibn Jaṭṭāb*, ed. Ḥassan el-Ghailani. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation supervised by Dr. M<sup>a</sup> Jesús Viguera Molíns (Madrid: University Complutense, 1994), 324. See Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, “Revelando nuevos vínculos familiares de la dinastía Nazarí en el siglo XIII: Amat al-‘Azīz y los Banū Ḥudayr de Crevillente,” *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos*, no. 60 (2011): 67–69.

women of the palace and of Muḥammad IV,” brother of Yūsuf I. Encouraged by certain people who supported his political aspirations despite his social status, this black slave decided to kill Yūsuf I (733-755/1333-1354).<sup>16</sup> It seems that in the fifteenth century—at the end of the Nasrid history—black slave women still existed in the Nasrid household, as several documents reveal. The lists of Muslim converts to Christianity from Granada, issued between 1499-1500, register the existence of several black women, respectively named Mahabuva (Maḥbūba), “laundress” of Emir Abū l-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Sa’d or Muley Hacén (869- 887/1464-1482; 888-890/1483-1485); Bovalica, “black servant of the [Moorish] queen;” Omalfata (Umm al-Faṭḥ), “housekeeper of the [Moorish] queen;” Mançora (Manşūra), “also servant of the [Moorish] queen;” and Çaida (Sa’īda), “servant of the [Moorish] queen.”<sup>17</sup>

Together with these Sudanese women, some Christian slave girls also integrated the household of the sultanas of the Alhambra as servants in the fifteenth century. Maybe the best example is that one of Soraya who, before becoming the concubine and favourite partner of the aforementioned Sultan Muley Hacén, was taken to the Nasrid court as a Christian captive, being in charge of sweeping out the chamber of ‘Ā’isha, the daughter of this emir, as we will check later. Other cases are those of Çafarjala “servant at the house of Muley Hacén,” who was originally a Christian woman from Higuera de Martos, and Reduan (Riḍwān) Matran “who was the butler of the Moorish queen”.<sup>18</sup>

### **Identifying the Female Residential Spaces in Nasrid Alhambra: A Hypothesis**

The official residence par excellence of the Nasrid sultanas was the Alhambra Palace. However, not all of them inhabited and enjoyed the same Alhambra. As it is well known, this castle underwent a process of gradual construction throughout the history of the Nasrid dynasty, from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, respectively reflecting the moments of its inception, splendour, and decadence.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-‘ibar* (Beyrut: Dār al-Fikr, 1979), IV, 174/415 and VII, 304 and 383 *apud* Francisco Vidal Castro, “El asesinato político en al-Andalus: la muerte violenta del emir en la dinastía nazarí,” in *De muerte violenta: política, religión y violencia en Al-Andalus*, ed. María Isabel Fierro Bello (Madrid: CSIC, 2004), 366–370.

<sup>17</sup> Miguel Ángel Ladero Quesada, “Nóminas de conversos granadinos,” in *Estudios sobre Málaga y el Reino nazarí de Granada en el V Centenario de la Conquista* (Malaga: Servicio de Publicaciones Diputación Provincial de Malaga, 1987), 309–310.

<sup>18</sup> Miguel Ángel Ladero Quesada, “Nóminas de conversos granadinos,” 306.

<sup>19</sup> On the historical development of the Nasrid dynasty, see the last revisions made from the gender perspective by Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, “Granada, capital of al-Andalus and Core of the Nasrid Kingdom

In its dual role as the seat of power and royal residence, the Alhambra's space was designed to be a house with public areas (where politics took place) and private zones (where intimate family life developed). That physical distribution was the architectural materialization of the segregation by gender established by Islamic societies for their individuals at a theoretical level. In this sense, the royal family male inhabitants of the Alhambra could frequent both parts—being responsible for politics and members of the ruling family—while women were officially confined to the domestic and private space, generally located in the upper rooms of the palaces of the Alhambra, from where they could observe daily life without being seen. However, this division did not prevent from breaking the norm in practice with cases in which royal Nasrid women transcended the threshold of their gynaeceum to participate actively in those governmental functions assigned to men, such as politics, diplomacy or economy, as so many cases of Nasrid women illustrate. In other words, “it is a question of (...) relativisation of what was considered the women's domain.”<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, although the boundaries delimiting public and private scopes at the Alhambra were actually blurred in terms of gender, throughout these pages, we will only focus on identifying those residential areas in which female life concentrated throughout the gradual building process of the Alhambra.

In the second half of the thirteenth century, the first Nasrid emir, Muḥammad I (629-671/1232-1273), ordered the construction of the *alcazaba* (*qaṣba*) of the Alhambra, which began in the westernmost side of the Sabika hill. This period was one of intense military activity due to the general crisis in al-Andalus after the fall of the Almohad empire. No palace had already been erected since the Nasrid family still did not view itself as a court or dynasty.<sup>21</sup> However, this military infrastructure also had to

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(7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup>/13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries),” in *A Companion to Islamic Granada*, ed. Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2021), 122–163, and “The Banū Naṣr: The Founders of the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada (Thirteenth-Fifteenth Centuries),” in *The Nasrid Kingdom of Granada between East and West (Thirteenth to Fifteenth Centuries)*, ed. Adela Fábregas (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2021), 39–72.

<sup>20</sup> Elena Díez Jorge, “Women and the Architecture of al-Andalus. An Historiographical Analysis,” in *Reassessing the Roles of Women as 'Makers' of Medieval Art and Architecture*, ed. Therese Martin (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012), 1:502, 509–510 and 518–519. See also Elena Díez Jorge (ed.), *The Alhambra and The Generalife. An art history guide* (Granada: Universidad de Granada-Junta de Andalucía, 2008), 29–31.

<sup>21</sup> On the rule of this emir and the process of formation of the Nasrid kingdom, see Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Ibn al-Aḥmar. Vida y reinado del primer sultán de Granada* (Granada: University of Granada-Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife, 2017).

accommodate the principal members of the Nasrid family, as Grenadine chronicler Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh Ibn Juzayy (d. after 810/1408) relates:<sup>22</sup>

And when [Muḥammad I] erected this citadel, he ordered to construct a building in it for his residence as well as some houses for the notable figures, giving lodging in it to the people of his native town, Arjona, although none of them interacted.

Emir Muḥammad I and his male and female relatives must have lived in these modest dwellings, thus sowing the first seeds of life inside the Alhambra. Among his female relatives, his mother (Fāṭima), his legitimate wife ('Ā'isha), perhaps his anonymous second wife or concubine, and their daughters (Mu'mina and Shams) can be supposed to have lived in this *alcazaba*, within the so-called Homage Tower or Great Tower (*al-Burj al-'azīm*) where, according to tradition, Emir Muḥammad I settled after conquering Granada.<sup>23</sup> This tower was large enough to house an entire family, as it had six floors, including a dungeon. The uppermost floor of the Homage Tower comprised a small residence, a novel sort of construction around a central open-air courtyard.<sup>24</sup>

When his son, Muḥammad II (671-701/1273-1301), was proclaimed emir, Alhambra's horizons broadened just at the turn of the fourteenth century. This sovereign is credited with having begun to erect the first palaces of the Alhambra and the Generalife (*Jannat al-'arīf*), as well as the construction of the first mansions in the capital, Granada. The women who made up his family, his wife Nuzha, his Christian concubine Shams al-Ḍuḥà, as well as his sons and daughters (Fāṭima, Mu'mina, and Shams), and even his famous sister Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar, must have witnessed these remarkable improvements.<sup>25</sup>

There were new architectural additions during the reigns of Muḥammad III (701-708/1302-1309) and Naṣr (708-713/1309-1314), both responsible for the construction of several royal dwellings and buildings—including what is known as the Partal Palace (*al-Barṭāl*)—inside the Alhambra. As neither of these emirs married or had descendants, we

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<sup>22</sup> Ibn Juzayy, *Maṭla' al-yumn wa-iqbāl fī intiqā'* *Kitāb al-Iḥtifāl wa-istidrāk mā fāta-hu min al-maqāl*, ed. Muḥammad al-'Arabī al-Khaṭṭābī (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1986), 24; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Ibn al-Aḥmar*, 102.

<sup>23</sup> Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Ibn al-Aḥmar*, 103.

<sup>24</sup> José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, "The Alhambra and the Generalife. The Eternal Landmarks of Islamic Granada," in *A Companion to Islamic Granada*, 368.

<sup>25</sup> José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, "The Alhambra and the Generalife," 376. On the women of Muḥammad II's family, see Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las sultanas de la Alhambra*, 58–60.

assume that only their respective mothers, Nuzha (mother of Muḥammad III) and Shams al-Ḍuḥà (mother of Naṣr), and their common sister, Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar, could have enjoyed these spaces, although the sources do not mention anything relevant on this subject.<sup>26</sup>

However, as the fourteenth century goes on, we find much more information about the houses and private rooms of the Nasrid women in the palace of the Alhambra. Indeed, the proclamation of Ismā'īl I (713-725/1314-1325) as emir after overthrowing his uncle Naṣr was a major starting point of an intense building process that would bring the Alhambra to its peak in the fourteenth century. This sultan was responsible for the erection of his own palace, which has not survived but was located approximately where the modern Mexuar hall is. As the Arabic chronicles reflect, the rule of Ismā'īl I was extremely influenced by his mother, the Great Lady (*al-sayyida al-kubrā*) Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar (d. 749/1349). It is important to note that he was able to succeed to the throne thanks to the royal blood of his mother, who, as mentioned earlier, was not only the granddaughter of Muḥammad I, but also the daughter of Muḥammad II, the sister of Muḥammad III and half-sister of Naṣr. In Ibn al-Khaṭīb's words, "she was a very noble lady related to the kings [on all four sides]."<sup>27</sup> Fāṭima's royal lineage was essential for Ismā'īl I's succession to power in 713 (1314) as he could not inherit it from his father, Abū Sa'īd Faraj, who was never appointed emir. Thus, despite being a woman, Sultana Fima transmitted to her son Ismā'īl I both nobility and the right to rule, continuing the legitimate ruling branch inaugurated by the founder of the dynasty, Muḥammad I, which she also represented.<sup>28</sup>

The new palace created by Ismā'īl I must surely have been inhabited by his mother and his three Christian concubines, Bihār, Qamar, and 'Alwa, together with the sons and daughters he conceived with them: Yūsuf I (with Bihār); Ismā'īl (with Qamar) and Muḥammad IV, Faraj, Fāṭima, and Maryam (with 'Alwa). 'Alwa was "the favourite (*aḥzā*)"

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<sup>26</sup> Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las sultanas de la Alhambra*, 69–70.

<sup>27</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāṭa fi akhbār Gharnāṭa*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh 'Inān (Cairo: al-Sharika al-Duwaliyya li-l-Ṭibā'a, 2001), 1:378.

<sup>28</sup> On this interesting phenomenon on accessing to power thanks to the royal blood of a woman and the figure of Fāṭima within the Nasrid history, see María Jesús Rubiera Mata, "El vínculo cognático en al-Andalus," in *Actas del Primer Congreso de Historia de Andalucía. Andalucía Medieval* (Cordova: Monte de Piedad-Caja de Ahorros, 1978), 1:121–124; María Jesús Rubiera Mata, "La princesa Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar. La «María de Molina» de la dinastía nazarí de Granada," *Medievalismo*, no. 6 (1996), 183–189; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, "Mujer y poder en el reino nazarí de Granada. Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar, la perla central del collar de la dinastía (siglo XIV)," *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, no. 6/1 (January-June 2016), 269–300.

of Ismā'īl I for her personality and became the mother of his firstborn son, Muḥammad IV (725-733/1325-1333). However, this sultan distanced himself from her at the end of his reign because of a presumed criminal affair that she committed due to her coquetry (*al-dālla*).

The dramatic episode of the murder of Ismā'īl I in 725 (1325) indicates the location of his mother, Sultana Fāṭima, living in one of the palaces of the Alhambra: The emir's paternal cousin, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl, decided to assassinate Ismā'īl I in revenge for a strong reprimand dispensed to him by the latter when he refused to give the emir a Christian slave that he had captured in Martos (Jaen), whom the sultan wanted to keep for himself. Muḥammad, assisted by a group of his relatives and followers, assaulted the emir with a dagger in his private council, stabbing him three times and severing his carotid artery. Ismā'īl I was immediately taken to one of his rooms in the Alhambra palace where, according to the *Chronicle of Don Alfonso the Eleventh*, his mother, Fāṭima, was: "And the Royal [Judge] turned around (...) and held him in his arms, and with great difficulty, took him to the palace where the mother of the King was (...) ("Et tornó [el Alguacil] del Rey (...) et tomólo en los brazos, et esforzándose, levólo a un palacio do estaba su madre del Rey ...<sup>29</sup>" Although the emir managed to survive for a while as the wound was covered by both a poultice and his turban, he finally died at the age of forty-seven, on Monday, 26 *Rajab* 725 (8 July 1325), and was buried two days later in the royal cemetery of the Alhambra, the *Rawḍa*, located to the south of the Palace of Lions.<sup>30</sup>

After the death of Ismā'īl I, Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar almost certainly continued to reside in the Nasrid royal palace, where her private house must have been located, as her participation in Nasrid court affairs intensified during the following years.<sup>31</sup> The main

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<sup>29</sup> *Crónica de don Alfonso el Onceno* (1787), ed. Francisco Cerdá y Rico (Madrid: Imprenta de Don Antonio de Sancha, 1787), 206–207, chapter 5, *apud* Francisco Vidal Castro, "El asesinato político en al-Andalus," 377, footnote 74; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, "Mujer y poder en el reino nazarí de Granada," 282.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāta*, 1:392–393; Ibn al-Khab, *Al-Lamḥa al-badriyya fī l-dawla al-naṣriyya*. Ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (Beirut: Dār al-Afāq al-Jadīda, 1980), 87–88. On the Nasrid royal cemetery and the archaeological interventions undertaken in this burial area, see the following publications: José Javier Álvarez García, "Intervención arqueológica de apoyo a la restauración y puesta en valor de la Rauda," *Cuadernos de la Alhambra*, no. 36 (2000): 111–154; Leopoldo Torres Balbás, *Paseos por la Alhambra. Una necrópolis nazarí: la Rauda* (Madrid: Archivo Español de Arte y Arqueología. Centro de Estudios Históricos, 1926); Pedro Salmerón Escobar and María Cullel Muro, "La Rauda de la Alhambra. La memoria del lugar como base de la intervención," *Cuadernos de la Alhambra*, no. 36 (2000): 71–110.

<sup>31</sup> On the analysis of the Nasrid houses, see the following publications: Antonio Orihuela, *Casas y palacios nazaríes. Siglos XIII-XV* (Barcelona-Granada: El Legado andalusí-Lunwerg, 1995); Julio Navarro Palazón, *Casas y palacios de al-Andalus. Siglos XII y XIII* (Barcelona-Granada: El Legado andalusí-Lunwerg, 1995); Antonio

reason was the proclamation of her grandson, Muḥammad IV, on 26 *Rajab* 725 (8 July 1325), who was only ten years old and still underage. This circumstance forced her to take an active role in the government of Muḥammad IV, a responsibility recognized in Arabic historiography which refers to her as “the grandmother of the sultan (*jaddat al-sulṭān*).<sup>32</sup>” The first strategic move from Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar was to remove Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn al-Maḥrūq al-Ash‘arī (d. 729/1328) from the political scene. He was the delegate (*wakīl*) of Ismā‘īl I and *qahramān al-dār al-sulṭāniyya* (butler or household manager of the Nasrid royal house) and wanted to establish a personal dictatorship, taking advantage of Muḥammad IV being underage.<sup>33</sup>

The private residential space occupied by Fāṭima in the area of the Alhambra was precisely the location chosen for her to carry out this murder, which ensured the successful “extension of the maternal empire,” as supported by different Nasrid, Maghribi, and even Western historians. The foremost example of this is Ibn al-Khaṭīb, who explicitly states Fāṭima’s involvement in this crime in his biography of Ibn al-Maḥrūq in his work *Al-Iḥāta*, where he comments:

Ibn al-Maḥrūq ... was attacked by two young slaves who had remained with their protégé in the house of the Great Lady, the grandmother of the sultan (*dār al-ḥurra al-kabīra jaddat al-sulṭān*), who he used to consult on [political] matters since he considered her a support for her interests. However, both slaves went after him and attacked him with their scimitars. He [Ibn al-Maḥrūq] threw himself into the water shaft of the house, while they continued to stab him on all sides until he expired, may Almighty God have pity upon him.<sup>34</sup>

Ibn al-Khaṭīb offers a very similar version of these events in another of his works, the *A‘māl*, which directly involves Fāṭima in his account of the murder of Ibn al-Maḥrūq, reported to have taken place in this powerful woman’s home:

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Orihuela, Antonio, “From the Private to the Public Space: Domestic and Urban Architecture of Islamic Granada,” in *A Companion to Islamic Granada*, 407–440 and Elena Díez Jorge, “Domestic Spaces during the Nasrid period: Houses,” in *The Nasrid Kingdom of Granada between East and West*, 263–303.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāta*, 2:136–137; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, “Mujer y poder en el reino nazarí de Granada,” 283.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāta*, 1:533 and 537; Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Lamḥa*, 91 and 94; María Jesús Rubiera Mata, “La princesa Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar,” 188; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, “Mujer y poder en el reino nazarí de Granada,” 283–285.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāta*, 2:136–137.

This chapter of the plot was none other than the assassination of the delegate (*wakīl*) and vizier (*ṣāhib al-'amr*) [Ibn al-Maḥrūq], executing the orders of the sultan against him, as [it turns out] that a group of slaves of his father [Ismā'īl I] had overcome him and separating and killing him. It is the case that he [Ibn al-Maḥrūq] had *entered the house of the sultan's grandmother (dār al-jadda)* to consult her on matters of import, as was his wont. Two young slaves (*mamlūkāni ḥadathāni*) were entrusted with his protection and attacked and killed him in the presence of the aged grandmother (*al-jadda al-'ajūz*). This [happened] on the night of the second day of the month of *muḥarram* of the year 729 (6 November 1328).<sup>35</sup>

Despite Fāṭima's protection of Muḥammad IV, he was to suffer the same fate as his father, being also assassinated on 13 *dhū l-ḥijja* 733 (25 August 1333): The emir was ambushed by the river Guadiaro—when returning from Gibraltar—where some assassins attacked him with lances and a renegade slave called Zayyān dealt the mortal blow.<sup>36</sup> The events which followed continue to provide interesting clues as to the whereabouts of Fāṭima as well as that of other women in the Alhambra, and places them at the forefront of political action in historical narratives.

Thus, on the day of the sudden murder of Muḥammad IV, Fāṭima's second grandson, Yūsuf I (733-755/1333-1354), was proclaimed emir and at only 15 years old was also underage. This event prompted Fāṭima to share guardianship of the new sovereign with a *ḥājib* or chamberlain named Riḍwān (d. 760/1359).<sup>37</sup> The Arabic texts of the period allude to the youth of the new emir who, according to Ibn al-Khaṭīb,<sup>38</sup> “lived *in the house of his noble and saintly mother* [Bihār], [whose] luxury and easy life were apparent in his body.”

We do not know the possible location of the Sultana Bihār's house, one of the concubines taken by Ismā'īl I. However, it was almost certainly located in one of the palace areas of the Alhambra for being the dwelling of the mother of the emir's heir. The same historian<sup>39</sup> goes on to relate how, before becoming an adult, Yūsuf I was unable to use his estate or to take charge of matters relating to the court and was not in a position

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<sup>35</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *A'māl al-a'lām fī man buy'ia qabla al-iḥtilām min mulūk al-Islām*, ed. Évariste Lévi-Provençal (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfa al-Dīniyya, 2004), 297; María Jesús Rubiera Mata, “La princesa Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar,” 188; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, “Mujer y poder en el reino nazarí de Granada,” 284.

<sup>36</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāta*, 1:540–541; Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Lamḥa*, 96–97; Ibn al-Khab, *A'māl*, 304. On the assassination of this Nasrid emir, see Francisco Vidal Castro, “El asesinato político en al-Andalus,” 364–366.

<sup>37</sup> For his biography, see Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāta*, 1:506–513.

<sup>38</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *A'māl*, 304–305.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *A'māl*, 305.



to decide on the food on his table within his own palace (*qaṣr*) until he became an adult. When the sultan reached adulthood, Ibn al-Khaṭīb revealed that “he began to consider the idea of taking a concubine (*umm al-walad*).”<sup>40</sup> In 737 (1337), this emir took a legitimate wife of Nasrid blood, whose name we ignore. However, we know she was a daughter of the military leader called Abū l-Ḥajjāj [Yūsuf]. He also took two Christian slaves, Buthayna and Rīm, with whom he fathered both sons and daughters: Muḥammad V (755-760/1354-1359; 763-793/1362-1391), Aḥmad, and ‘Ā’isha (with Buthayna); and Ismā’īl II, Qays, Fāṭima, Mu’mina, Jadīja, Shams, and Zaynab (with Rīm).<sup>41</sup>

The expansion of the harem and subsequent descendants of Yūsuf I had their reflection in the impressive architectural growth of the Alhambra which, as a royal residence, had to accommodate both the men and women of the emir’s close family in the fourteenth century. As Ibn al-Khaṭīb states,<sup>42</sup> Yūsuf I “favored peace ... and loved constructions, garments, and collecting jewelry and treasures, and his wealth exceeded that of other kings of his time.” Therefore, he was responsible for the building, among other notable spaces, of the famous Palace of Comares, a complex known both as *Qaṣr al-sulṭān* (“sultan’s Alcázar” or “Royal Alcázar”) and *Dār al-Mulk* (“Royal House”). These two names reflect its double function of royal residence and seat of power, respectively.



<sup>40</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *A'māl*, 304–305; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las Sultanas de la Alhambra*, 73.

<sup>41</sup> Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las Sultanas de la Alhambra*, 74.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Lamḥa*, 102.

**Figure 2. View of the Serrallo at the Palace of Comares (Alhambra). Image by Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo**

From this flourishing period in construction onwards, it became easier to identify the location of the spaces reserved for family life and the women's quarters within the Alhambra complex. In the case of the Palace of Comares, women probably carried out their private life in the upper quarters of the main buildings erected in the fourteenth century. One example of this is the area currently known as the *Serrallo*, located on the upper floor of the south gallery of the palace, overlooking the Court of the Myrtles. Attention should also be drawn to the existence of a *zagan* (*iṣṭawān*) on the right end of this gallery, as we can believe that it points to the presence of women within it.<sup>43</sup>

Another architectural addition attributed to the Emir Yūsuf I was the Tower of Abū l-Ḥajjāj (*Burj Abī l-Ḥajjāj*), traditionally known in Christian times as the Queen's Dressing Room, referring to empress Elisabeth, wife to emperor Charles V. Although Medieval Arabic sources show no record of female presence in this space, visual culture does, as an original floor tile conserved from this tower, or rather a fragment of it, shows the figures of a woman and man of the period at either side of the Nasrid coat of arms.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> The entrance hallways were architectural solutions which allowed direct access from the street to the upper quarters of a dwelling. This resource was extremely useful to women as this direct access allowed them to go up to the upper rooms of a house or palace, where other women they were going to visit lived, without having to be exposed to the masculine gaze when crossing spaces and courtyards to reach these locations.

<sup>44</sup> José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, "The Alhambra and the Generalife," 374–375.



**Figure 3. Floor triangular tile from the Queen’s Dressing Room (Alhambra) with a woman holding the Nasrid coat of the Banda (ca. 1380). Archive of the Patronato de la Alhambra and Generalife (ES-18-116), Colección de dibujos (D0165)**

Despite her old age, it has been suggested that under the aegis of Yūsuf I, Sultana Fāṭima may have intervened in the plan for the construction of the palaces of the Alhambra, which the ruler had built during his reign —especially that of Comares— thus continuing the building policy followed by his uterine brother, Muḥammad III.<sup>45</sup> The

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<sup>45</sup> María Jesús Rubiera Mata, “La princesa Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar,” 188; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, “Mujer y poder en el reino nazarí de Granada,” 287.

truth is that the profound mark that her life left in Nasrid history and policy was justly honoured at the time of her death. She passed away during the reign of her grandson, Yūsuf I, at dawn on 7 *dhū l-ḥijja* 749 (26 February 1349), at the age of over ninety lunar years. Ibn al-Khaṭīb dedicated to this woman some heartfelt words praising her remarkable personality and summarising her life:

His mother, a highly noble lady related to kings [on all four sides], was Fāṭima, daughter of the Emir of the Believers Abū 'Abd Allāh [Muḥammad II]. She was the flower of the kingdom, the pearl at the heart of the necklace [of the dynasty], the pride [of the women] of the harem, ambitious for honor and respect, the link [which assured the subjects] the protection [of the kings] and the [living] memory of the legacy [of the royal family]. All her life, [she was often] sought for good counsel, like a catalogue of morals and an epitaph of [illustrious] ancestors, which continued until she died during the reign of her grandson, the Sultan Abū l-Ḥajjāj [Yūsuf I]—may God have mercy on her!,—at over ninety [lunar] years of age.<sup>46</sup>

Ibn al-Khaṭīb's account of the funeral of this sultana shows the high esteem in which she was held. According to the vizier from Loja, the crowds of people attending her obsequies were befitting her dignity and enormous legacy. Another detail of her relevance is that she was buried in the royal Nasrid cemetery of the *Rawḍa*, within the Alhambra<sup>47</sup>. Neither her husband nor her brothers (Muḥammad III and Naṣr), nor her grandson Muḥammad IV—all of them sultans—had been buried there but were relegated to the original cemetery of the *Sabīka* hill. Fāṭima was buried instead alongside her father, Muḥammad II, and her son, Ismā'īl I. The *Rawḍa* was, therefore, the last dwelling of this sultana who sacralized with her burial this accommodation, which was the final resting place for many men and women of the Nasrid dynasty. It is curious to note that, although medieval Islamic societies were characterized by a rigorous separation of individuals during their lifetime—a fact also evident in the distribution of architectural space—the bounds of that segregation disappeared at death, when both men and women were interchangeably buried in a shared necropolis.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāta*, 1:378; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las Sultanas de la Alhambra*, 66; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, "Mujer y poder en el reino nazarí de Granada," 288.

<sup>47</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Iḥāta*, 1:379; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las Sultanas de la Alhambra*, 66, 267–271.

<sup>48</sup> Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las Sultanas de la Alhambra*, 259.

During her funeral services, Ibn al-Khaṭīb publicly recited a heartfelt string of forty-one verses he had composed, clearly showing how the Alhambra was plunged into grief by the loss of this emblematic Nasrid woman:

(...) Do you not see that the glorious quarters are impoverished  
and that all the green foliage of their leafy trees has dried out?

(...) Our great lady, being spared the affliction  
of natural patience is the [only] satisfaction [we could give you].

We lost you; our eyes did not lose [so much] when they were deprived of your light,  
Since, for us, you were a guiding light for those who travelled at night.

(...) It is true that Islam and its people suffered your loss;  
a famed treasure and of great renown.

[The Sultana Fāṭīma] was unique, surpassing the women of her time  
As the Night of Destiny surpasses all other nights.<sup>49</sup>

(...) Her firm opinions, the merit of her politics  
and her pride in the origin [of her family] were the epitome of excellence.

A glorious *dīwān*, whose pages included  
the intimate[history] of the glorious Nasrid kings.

(...) Then [turn back] to the Royal palace, darkened for you,  
like a sanctuary for your ghost, who travels at night.

(...) [How many] dwellings in the kingdom  
whose corners have been emptied,

When the halo of a palace appeared without a full moon!

(...) If a grave becomes a *qibla*<sup>50</sup> for the people,

we deposit our prayers by this sepulchre.

And if creatures come upon the road leading to a cemetery

where your grave is, surrounded by virtue and piety,

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<sup>49</sup> The “Night of Destiny” (*Laylat al-Qadr*) is that one when the prophet Muhammad received his first revelation of the Qur’an. For this reason, it is considered the most important night in the history of Islam.

<sup>50</sup> The *qibla* is the direction towards the Kaaba, in the Sacred Mosque in Mecca, hence used by Muslims as the direction of prayer.

They would walk around it seven [times], reciting the prayers of the pilgrims at Mecca,<sup>51</sup>

and would don the *iḥrām*;<sup>52</sup> only thus would they gain a reward [from God].<sup>53</sup>

Already in the times of Muḥammad V (755-760/1354-1359; 763-793/1362-1391) we can follow the physical trail of the women of the Nasrid dynasty in other enclaves within the Alhambra. As is well known, this emir was responsible for the completion of the work on the Palace of Comares, which his father, the sultan, had been unable to complete due to his sudden assassination 755 (1354) as well as the construction c. 1380 of the imposing Palace of the Lions (*al-Riyāḍ al-Sa'īd*, “the Happy Garden”).



**Figure 4. View of the upper rooms of the Hall of the Abencerrajes from the upper floor of the Hall of the Two Sisters (Alhambra). Image by Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo**

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<sup>51</sup> That is, they recite the *Talbiyah* or prayer said by Muslim pilgrims in Mecca.

<sup>52</sup> White clothing and uniform worn by Muslims during the rites of the pilgrimage to Mecca. This attire symbolizes that the pilgrim has entered the sacred state following major ablutions or the ritual cleansing of the whole body.

<sup>53</sup> Ibn al-Khaṭīb, *Dīwān Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb al-Salmānī*, ed. Muḥammad Miftāḥ (Casablanca: Dār al-Thaqāfa li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī', 1989), 1:396–398 (poem 302); Ibn al-Khab, *Al-Iḥāta*, 1:379; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, *Las Sultanas de la Alhambra*, 268–270; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo, “Mujer y poder en el reino nazarí de Granada,” 289–291.

It is from this flourishing period that the spaces reserved for family life in the Alhambra and the women's quarters within the complex of the Alhambra become easier to identify, as the two main palaces of the complex were built in the fourteenth century. The first one, the Palace of Comares, then known as *Qaṣr al-sulṭān* ("sultan's Alcázar" or "royal fortress") as well as that of *Dār al-Mulk* ("Royal House"), two names which reflect its double function of royal residence and seat of power, were started by Yūsuf I but completed by Muḥammad V. The second one, the Palace of the Lions (*al-Riyāḍ al-Sa'īd*, "the Happy Garden") was built around 1380 by Muhammad V. Despite the almost complete absence of textual references placing specific figures in both complexes at the time, we can suppose that the upper quarters of the main buildings must have been the main hub of the lives of Nasrid men and women, as seen in the account of French courtier Antonio de Lalaing (d. 1540), who visited the Court of the Lions in 1502.<sup>54</sup>

Most of these higher rooms of this palatial complex were located in the upper section of the Hall of the Two Sisters and, mainly, of the Hall of the Abencerrajes, which contained the nucleus of the chambers that the vizier of the Nasrid court, Ibn al-Khaṭīb, called *Dār al-Nisā'*, which means "the house of the women," occupied by the wives and concubines of the emirs since the times of Muḥammad V. So, this nucleus includes a dwelling arranged around a courtyard, romantically named the Court of the Harem, which these women probably could inhabit with the privacy of her family life preserved, one of the main goals of Nasrid domestic architecture. According to Antonio Orihuela,

this was achieved by means of an almost total absence of openings in external façades, with the exception of plain doorways of brick arches that were usually framed by a rectangular molding or *alfiz*, the use of smaller posterns for people to pass through in the main doors accessing the entrance halls, and the angled design of these. The courtyard was the focus of family life, which was lived largely on the ground floor, where there was normally an entrance hall, a main multi-purpose room, a kitchen of lesser importance and a latrine.<sup>55</sup>

This theory is once again supported by the architecture, with the existence of a *zaguán* or direct access from the street to the house.

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<sup>54</sup> Antonio Gallego y Burín, *La Alhambra* (Granada: Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife, 1963), 113–114, footnote 191.

<sup>55</sup> Antonio Orihuela, "From the Private to the Public Space," 413–415.



**Figure 5. Courtyard of the Harem (Alhambra, 14<sup>th</sup> century), where the *Dār al-nisā'* was supposedly located. Image by Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo**

This layout of the accommodations also brings up the question of how the residential spaces of the Alhambra were distributed between the sultan and the women from his closest family circle. Ibn al-Khaṭīb, in the same period as Muḥammad V, offers a highly revealing account in one of the chapters of his treatise on politics, *Al-Maqāma fī l-siyāsa* (“Session on Politics”), dedicated to the sultan and already mentioned. In it, he examines the spatial location of the emir and his women as a group (*al-ḥuram*) in their private quarters:

Be careful not to judge [your women] by public opinion without having seen [the woman] by yourself, or else, you will cause yourself grief. Put the custody [of your wives] into the hands of old women, whose behaviour owes more to religion and loyalty, whose self-respect and virtue are superior. Choose them for their good intentions, good character, moral ease, and natural affability.



Prohibit them from winking [at each other] and being jealous of each other, as well as from rivalry and the preference of one over the rest. Bring peace amongst them in personal matters, turning a deaf ear to their demands and showing deference to their apprehensions.

Reduce your meetings with them, which should be your permanent concern and the moustached [guardian] of your harem. Be in privacy with them [only] when tiredness and tedium rule. And abstain from this if you are busy, irascible, sleepy, or apathetic due to the fatigue of the day.

*Locate your bedroom amongst them* for your blessings to be manifest and your movements to be hidden.

*Isolate [the woman] who gives birth in a [private] room*, in which her independence can be recognized and her circumstances respected due to her special feature. Do not repudiate any woman on someone else's advice or through intrigues, and do not entrust [your wives] with any small or serious matter.

*And take care that the serving staff is aware of their leaving the palaces* and that they can move away from the lion's jungle in their arrogance since no good perfume can be instantly detected. Those who most [behave] like this are sickly because of the age and despair of men and genies, taking advantage of their own previous inclination to good deeds, but no longer have a beautiful figure and suffer from senility.<sup>56</sup>

This text is an invaluable source of detailed information, thanks to which the women of the Nasrid dynasty can be located in specific spaces depending on different circumstances. Firstly, it advises the emir to ensure the permanent custody and isolation of these women in the palaces they resided in, either by guardians or older women of great honesty whose influence can only be positive. In addition, it discourages jealousy and rivalry between the women of the harem who, as is well known, were only driven by the possibility of becoming the mothers of the future heir to the sultan. This pressure must have made cohabitation in the rooms where they carried out their everyday lives very complex, although it did allow them to rear the children together.

The information provided by this account from Ibn al-Khaṭīb is all the more important due to the specific details on the location of the sultan and his wives in

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<sup>56</sup> al-Maqqarī, *Nafḥ al-ṭīb min guṣn al-Andalus al-ratīb wa-dhikr wazīri-hā Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb*, 4:439–440.

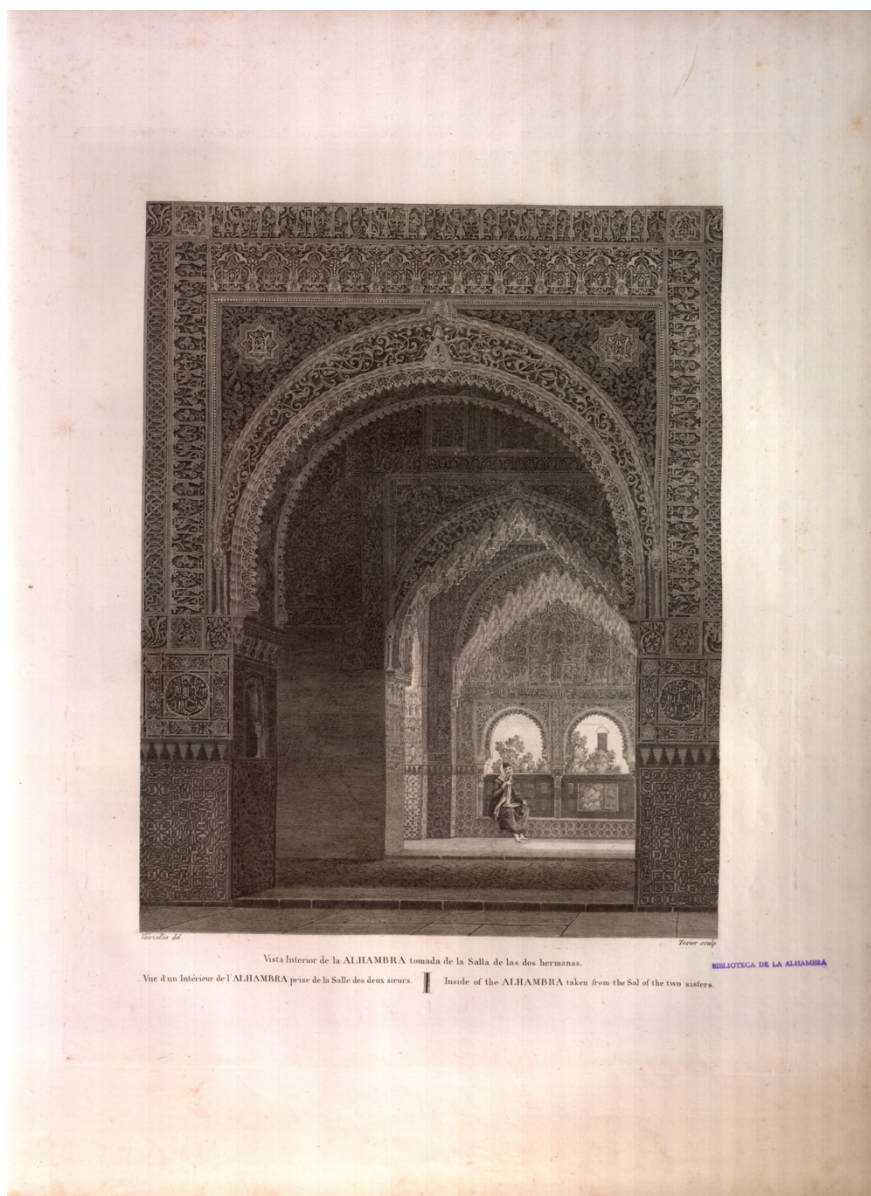
particular quarters. Most importantly, it places the figure of the emir in a private room, where he was almost certainly visited by any woman (wife or concubine) chosen to lie with him. However, the physical relations of the emir with his partners were limited to moments when he was not dealing with matters of state or feeling tired. The Maliki political school, which ruled the Nasrid kingdom of Granada, recognized the right of slave women to share their lord with the free co-wife (*al-ḥurra*) for an equal share of nights.<sup>57</sup> This text also shows how any woman who had borne children had her private room, thus confirming the importance that motherhood (especially of a son) had for legitimate wives and even more for concubines, whose position within the harem was strengthened by it. Finally, Ibn al-Khab suggests intense surveillance of the women leaving the palaces of the Alhambra since it seems they were not allowed to abandon it.

Another space whose poetic name reflects the (real or legendary) presence of Nasrid women in the Palace of the Lions is the Outlook of Lindaraja or Daraxa, both nomenclatures derived from the Arabic expressions *'Ayn Dār 'Ā'isha* ("the eye" or "the fountain of the House of 'Ā'isha") and *Dār 'Ā'isha* ("the House of 'Ā'isha"), respectively, since sitting on the floor of this balcony, it was possible to contemplate the beautiful views of the city of Granada. Although the inscriptions engraved at this place were not essentially feminine, we can find femininity in a nearby ornamental detail: a slender hand, probably belonging to a woman, who holds a branch on the left-hand section of the spandrel of the honeycomb arch at the entrance to the Outlook of Lindaraja.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Brunschvig, "Abd," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W.P. Heinrichs (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 1960), 1:27.

<sup>58</sup> José Miguel Puerta Vilchez, *Reading the Alhambra*, 227.



**Figure 6. Woman standing at the Outlook of Lindaraja (Alhambra). Alexandre de Laborde, *Voyage pittoresque et historique de l'Espagne* (1812). Library of the Patronato de la Alhambra and Generalife, A 5 3 07), Colección de Dibujos (D-C0165)**

We find the same motif in other Nasrid constructions promoted by the Emir Muḥammad V: at the windows of the Hall of the Two Sisters; in the front entryway of the Tower of Abū l-Ḥajjāj (Tower of the Queen's Dressing Room); and also in the Nasrid house of Daralhorra, on the left section of the spandrel of the central arch of its upper gallery.<sup>59</sup> The icon of this hand, which in the cases noted always holds the stalk from which a

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<sup>59</sup> José Miguel Puerta Vílchez, *Reading the Alhambra*, 227; Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo and Cynthia Robinson (coords.), *El palacio nazarí de Daralhorra* (Granada: Universidad de Granada-Patronato de la Alhambra y el Generalife, 2019), 102–103, 190–192.

flower blooms, has been described as “the hand of abundance,” since it “holds the stalk of abundance, attributes of power symbolising the dignity of the prince and the opulence and fertility during his rule;”<sup>60</sup> fertility which, in significant part, was the responsibility of the women of the Nasrid dynasty as important major vessels for procreation. Interestingly, this ornamental motif is present both in al-Andalus and the Christian world of the Iberian Peninsula. We find the same hand in Castillejo de Monteagudo (Murcia) and several *Mudejar* buildings, such as the Capilla de la Asunción of the Monasterio de las Huelgas (Burgos), the Royal Chapel of the Big Mosque of Cordova, the Synagogue of El Tránsito (Toledo), the Court of the Maidens in the Palace of Pedro I in the Royal Alcázar in Seville, and in the Palace of Fuensalida (Toledo).<sup>61</sup>



**Figure 7. Image of “the hand of abundance” at Daralhorra (Granada). Archive of the Patronato de la Alhambra and Generalife**

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<sup>60</sup> Expression coined by Óscar Campón Pichardo.

<sup>61</sup> Bárbara Boloix-Gallardo and Cynthia Robinson (coords.), *El palacio nazarí de Daralhorra*, 102–103, 190–192; Basilio Pavón Maldonado, *Tratado de arquitectura hispanomusulmana. Volumen 3: Palacios* (Madrid: CSIC, 2004), 350.

No architectural additions of note exist in residential spaces for men or women in the Alhambra, which implies that the sultans and sultanas from the fifteenth century probably continued to live in the areas described until now. Indeed, some sources, especially those written by Christian authors, support this assumption and are more telling when situating women in the main palaces of the Alhambra in specific scenes. In this regard, the most enlightening chronicles come from Hernando de Baeza (d. 1<sup>st</sup> half 16<sup>th</sup> c.), who acted as an interpreter in the negotiations for the surrender of Granada and was, therefore, contemporaneous to the events recorded in his work. This highly revealing statement informs about the complicated relationships between Emir Muley Hacén, his legitimate wife and paternal first cousin, 'Ā'isha, and his concubine and favourite, Soraya (Thurayyā'). Considering that Muley Hacén repudiated his legitimate wife, replacing her with his concubine, this chronicler gives a first-hand account of how the sultan met Soraya after she was captured in a Nasrid incursion in Aguilar de la Frontera (Cordova) c. 1470, and taken her to the Alhambra, where she was to remain until the end of the Nasrid era.<sup>62</sup>

Thus, when [Muley Hacén] was married and the most revered and feared king of all the kings of his time and all the kings that had gone before him, it came about that certain Almogaraes wished to raid Christian territory. Their leader was native to Aguilar [de la Frontera], a place located seven leagues from Cordova. They agreed that this should take place on a Saturday night because on the next day, Sunday, people did not go out to work, and the countryside would be safe; and agreed to gather around them near a spring in Aguilar, and so he did. Then, some children were captured when they came out to water their cattle. Among them was a Maiden, aged ten or twelve, whom was sold with the rest of the children in Granada and she was included in the fifth part due to the king, who gave her to his daughter to sweep out her chamber ... Therefore, she was in the house of her king, who, like almost all Moorish kings, indulged himself with lascivious behaviour, especially the one of taking all the maids of his house at will, and he had intercourse with her, helped by one of his page boys; and, one of those nights in which he called her upon, all the queen's maids were aware of it and knew that she had gone to a chamber where the king was and they also knew that the page had taken her. So, they waited for her return and repeatedly kicked her with their shodden feet so that she almost died.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> "Las cosas que pasaron," 6–7.

<sup>63</sup> "Estando así [Muley Hacén] casado y siendo el más estimado y temido rrey de quantos uvo en aquel tiempo muchos años ántes, subcedió que ciertos Almogaraues moros quisieron entrar á saltar en la tierra

This fragment is interesting to analyse, as it confirms the transfer of Soraya as a captive slave to the Alhambra in Granada, where, as we can read, she became a personal servant to the daughter and wife of Muley Hacén, both called 'Ā'isha, whose room she was in charge of sweeping. This also confirms that the emir, just like some of his ancestors, had his own room, to which he summoned the woman (wife or concubine) he wished to spend the night with, as was the case with Soraya.

Once Muley Hacén had become infatuated with this young slave, he decided to take her as his concubine, subsequently repudiating his paternal cousin 'Ā'isha. The consequences of this decision did not only affect family and politics at the heart of the Nasrid dynasty but also space as it involved a reorganisation of the distribution of the residential spaces of the Alhambra, as recorded again by Hernando de Baeza:<sup>64</sup>

[‘Ā’isha] had with her children her residence and status and servants in the chamber of the Lions, and the king [Muley Hacén] had his in the tower of Comares with the other queen [Soraya].<sup>65</sup>

This paragraph reflects how, at the very end of the Nasrid dynasty, the private residential areas of the Alhambra were still inhabited by both men and women, as well as the complexity in the special distribution of those zones from the gender perspective.

### **Concluding remarks**

As many other palaces and houses belonging to royal families in the Middle Ages in the Iberian Peninsula, the Alhambra of Granada became the official residence of both the

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de los christianos, y el adalid que los lleuaua era natural de Aguilar [de la Frontera], que es un lugar a siete leguas de Córdoua; y acordó que un sábado en la noche, porque otro día domingo no salian las gentes al trabaxo y el campo estaría seguro, de los poner çerca de euna fuente de aguilar; é hízolo así, y saliendo ciertos niños á dar agua á sus bestias, los captiuraron, entre los quales tomaron una moçuela de diez, o doze años, la qual vendiéndose con los otros niños en granada, la tomaron en el quinto que pertenescia á el rrey, el qual la dió á su hija, y tenia el cargo de barrer la cámara (...) Estando pues ella en casa del rrey, como todos los rreyes moros por la mayor parte fuesen muy dados á la luxuria, especialmente este que tenia por prosupuesto llevar todas las donzellas de su casa por un rrasero, emboluióse con esta por yntercesion de un pageçico suyo, y entre las otras noches que la enbio á llamar, fue una en que todas las donzellas de la rreyna fueron auisadas dello, y ssupieron como auia pasado á una cámara donde el rrey estaua, y que el page la avía lleuado, y aguardaronla à la buelta, y con las chancas de sus pies le dieron muchos golpes, hasta que quedó casi muerta.”

<sup>64</sup> *Las cosas que pasaron*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> “[‘Ā’isha] con sus hijos tenia su casa y estado y gente en el cuarto de los leones, y el rrey [Muley Hacén] en la torre de comares con la otra rreyna [Soraya].”

men and women of the Banū Naṣr (1232-1492) from the creation of their Islamic kingdom in the thirteenth century until its end, in the fifteenth century. Throughout these pages, we have tried to both revisit and reconstruct those areas of the Alhambra where the daily lives of the women of the Nasrid dynasty took place. In this sense, we considered necessary to turn this emblematic palace into a field of debate and reflection on how the segregation of spaces according to gender category was organized in the context of both Islamic society and architecture, also reconsidering the true extent of concepts such as public/private or political/domestic when applied to the residential areas of the Alhambra assigned to women.

As a starting point, we have opened this study by reflecting on the undeniable feminine essence of the Alhambra itself, as can be deduced from both the statements of celebrated Andalusī Muslim thinkers, such as Muḥyī l-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī, and the content of some of the verses engraved in the walls of this palace, which constitutes its female voice. In all these expressions, this royal complex expresses itself as an embellished bride expecting the arrival of the sultan in their wedding moment, a common metaphor developed by the most influential writers and poets of the medieval Islamic West, such as Ibn Baṭṭūta or Ibn Zamrak.

Apart from the feminine inner essence of the Alhambra, this monument also constituted a dwelling where men and women of the extensive Nasrid genealogical tree lived throughout the long history of this dynasty. Thanks to the data provided by the Arabic and Christian sources, it is possible to identify who were the women who integrated the Nasrid harem (*ḥarīm*), a social and legal reality composed of both legal wives (*zawjāt*) and Christian concubines (*ummahāt al-awlād*) which existed within the Islamic royal palaces despite its 'romantization' by the Orientalist literature and painting. Other textual references also make it possible to complete the picture of the household of these sultanas by identifying some of the members of their personal and domestic service, integrated mainly by black slave women from Sudan but also by some slave girls who came from the peninsular Christian area.

However, if it is possible to find accurate information about the identities of the sultanas of the Alhambra on the contrary, Arab historiography guards great silences concerning the exact places of this palatial complex in which their daily lives used to develop. The idiosyncrasy of the Arabic sources and their constant intention to protect both the physical and moral integrity of their female subjects makes it difficult to achieve their identification. Despite this handicap, we have tried to locate the specific areas of the

Alhambra where the *Dār al-nisā'* or “the house of women” may have been situated, gathering and analysing the sparse textual anecdotes reflecting the presence of women in different parts of this royal palace from the gender perspective and resorting to personal interpretations due this scarcity of textual evidences. Therefore, this circumstance has led us, on many occasions, to formulate frequent hypotheses and suppositions about the location of women in the residential areas of the Alhambra.

An exhaustive analysis of the evolution of the Nasrid harem reveals that it was developed from the very inception of this lineage in the thirteenth century until its end—that is to say, from times of Emir Muḥammad I until those of Boabdil —, increasing during the fourteenth century, when it reached its peak when the Alhambra itself also got its maximum splendour under the reigns of Emirs Ismā'īl I, Yūsuf I, and Muḥammad V. Therefore, it was under the rules of these sovereigns when it became easier to recognize the feminine and masculine residential areas at the different palaces erected at the Alhambra—Comares and Lions mainly—as Arabic and Christian texts turn out to be a little more eloquent on this regard.

As reproduced before, different anecdotes transmitted by several authors place specific royal women in particular areas and houses. Although on a theoretical level, women were ascribed to the private and domestic sphere of the Nasrid royal palaces, being in a distant situation from the political scope, the truth is that most of them participated in court affairs, making important decisions from the intimacy of their houses. The case of sultana Fāṭima bint al-Aḥmar (d. 749/1349) is the one better illustrates this phenomenon, which turned the dwellings of these Nasrid royal women into an extension of those areas at the Alhambra where politics were formally developed. The complexity of the Nasrid harem and the subsequent political and sentimental struggles involving women in the fifteenth century, at the end of the Nasrid history, such as 'Ā'isha and Soraya —wife and concubine of Muley Hacén, respectively— also found an interesting echo in the interpretation of the residential female areas of the Alhambra, as previously seen.

To conclude, this article intends to constitute a first approximation to this field of study, trusting that the appearance of new Medieval sources, the latest findings of archaeological interventions, and other architectural analysis will provide new data that allows progress on the identification of residential spaces of women at the Alhambra from a close interdisciplinary dialogue.



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