

ARCHITECTURE *of the* ISLAMIC WEST

North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, 700–1800

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with drawings by Nicholas Warner

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For Sheila

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THE NASRIDS IN AL-ANDALUS

The collapse of the Almohad empire following their catastrophic defeat in 1212 at the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa eventually led to the emergence of four regional powers in the Maghrib. Following the Almohad retreat to North Africa, the major Muslim cities of the Iberian peninsula, such as Córdoba and Seville, fell to the Christians, but the mountainous province of Granada came under the control of the Nasrids or Banu'l-Alhmar (r. 1230–1492), who successfully maintained a balance between their more powerful neighbors, Christians to the north and Muslims to the south. In North Africa three rival Berber dynasties arose in the east, central and western Maghrib respectively—the Hafsids of Tunis (1235–1554), the 'Abd al-Wadids or Zayyanids of Tlemcen (1236–1554) and the Marinids and Wattasids of Fez (1229–1549). Power in North Africa was balanced between the Hafsids in the east and the Marinids in the west, for both claimed to be the rightful heirs of the Almohads. The 'Abd al-Wadids were often caught between their more powerful neighbors and hardly had the resources to be major patrons of architecture except in their capital, Tlemcen. The build-ings of all three will be discussed in the following chapter.

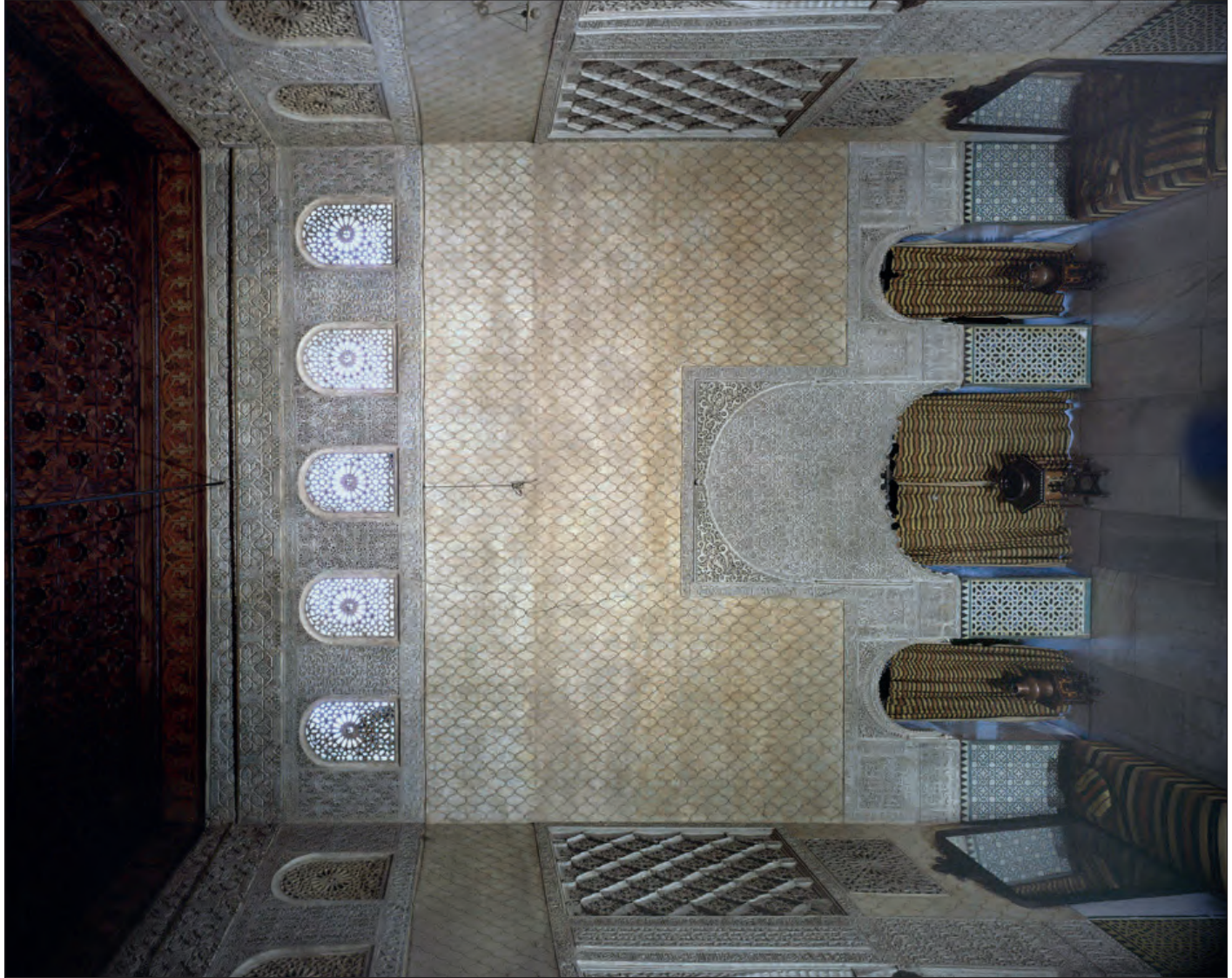
After the relative austerity of Almohad mosques, with their whitewashed interiors of rows of horseshoe arches, limited ornament, restricted use of inscriptions, and color largely restrained to some tile decoration on the exterior of minarets, the exuberance of post-Almohad architecture and decoration—both on the Iberian peninsula and in North

Africa—comes as something of a shock. While the exteriors of buildings remained relatively austere, courtyards and interior walls were decorated with colorful daabos of tiles laid in geometric mosaic patterns crowned by inscriptions, either in tile or plaster (or both). Upper walls are decorated with carved plaster panels, and eaves and ceilings were assembled from intricately joined and carved wood. All these materials and techniques—tiles, plaster, and wood—had already been used in Almoravid and Almohad mosques in restricted contexts, but their exuberant combination seems quite new. Of course, as the evidence for Almohad palaces is so fragmentary—whether in Spain or Morocco—it is difficult to say with any certainty whether the Almohads would have been less austere in their private settings than in their public constructions.¹

The Nasrids

The Nasrids rose from rather obscure origins in the small town of Arjona in the upper Guadalquivir valley during the confusion following the Almohad retreat from the Iberian Peninsula. Muhammad b. Yusuf b. Nasr, the leader of the clan, known either as the Banu'l-Alhmar or Banu'l-Nasr, soon lost his ancestral seat, but managed to briefly conquer the major Muslim cities of the south. Eventually he had to retreat with another local clan, the Banu Ashqilula, into the mountainous southeast, making Granada (Arab. *Gharnata*) his capital [Map 6]. The province of Granada—the fertile plain of the Genil river and the surrounding snow-covered Sierra Nevada mountains—had once been known as Elvira,

5.1 (left) Granada. Cuarto Real de Santo Domingo, interior





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5.8 (left) Granada, Alhambra, façade of Comares palace, 1354-91

5.9 (right) Granada, Alhambra, Court of the Myrtles, 1314-25

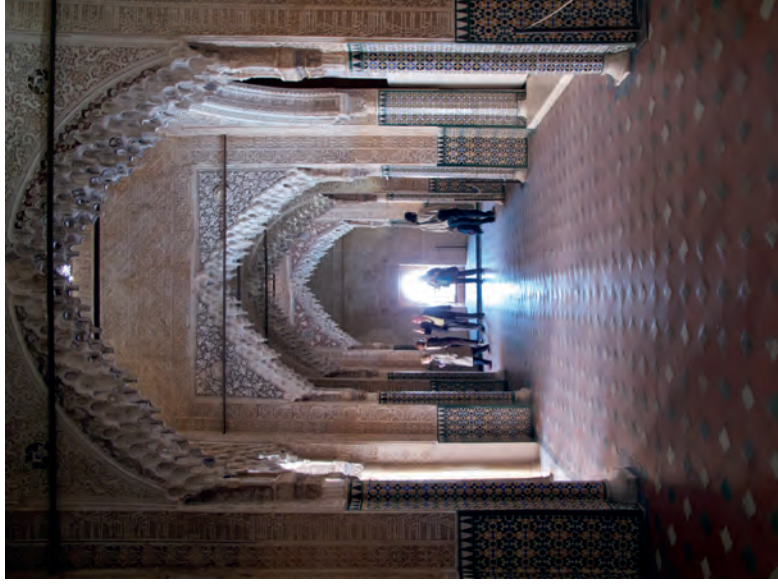


From the Mexuar one passes east through a narrow doorway into a small courtyard. Preceded by a triple-arched portico, the Cuarto Dorado, 'Golden chamber' stands to the north. This room, magnificently decorated with carved stucco, is thought to have served as a waiting room for those seeking entrance into the Comares palace, whose magnificent façade [fig. 5.8] opens opposite. The façade separated

the outer administrative bureaux of the palace from the sultan's living quarters, where the official and ceremonial acts of the court took place. The court's plain lateral walls and its marble-paved floor emphasize and illuminate the splendid carved and molded stucco, which otherwise is shaded from the sun.¹³ This internal façade, constructed under Muhammad V, presents the visitor with two identical doors



- 5.16 (top left) Granada, Alhambra, Hall of Abencerrajes, muqarnas ceiling
- 5.17 (bottom far left) Granada, Alhambra, Hall of the Two Sisters, muqarnas ceiling
- 5.18 (bottom near left) Granada, Alhambra, Mirador de la Daraxa
- 5.19 (right) Granada, Alhambra, Hall of the Kings



of white marble that pave the floor. Muqarnas squinches support an octagonal drum with eight pairs of windows and another superb muqarnas vault [fig. 5.17]. From the hall one passes through a vaulted room to the exquisitely decorated Mirador (or belvedere) of Lindaraxa (perhaps from 'ayn dar 'a 'isha, 'eye [or fountain] of Aisha's house') [fig. 5.18] overlooking the gardens below. An upper room for use in winter overlooked both the courtyard and the hall. To the west of the Court of the Lions was the Hall of the Mocárabes (muqarnas), whose original muqarnas ceiling was entirely replaced in the seventeenth century with a Baroque vault. On the east is the Hall of the Kings [fig. 5.19], which is a series of alternately square and rectangular spaces with

subsidiary side chambers or alcoves separated by elaborate muqarnas arches and covered with muqarnas and painted vaults. The paintings, in an apparently 'Northern' technique and style on gesso over leather, portray men in Arab dress and romantic fables of hunting, battles and chivalric deeds.¹⁸ The street that ran along the southern side of the palace led from the Mexuar past the royal mausoleum (*rawda*, 'garden') used from 1325 on. Archaeological investigation shows it to have been a relatively small square building with a central lantern, flanked by rectangular chambers and preceded by a forecourt. This type of building was already known from Maghrib, for example the tomb of the Sufi mystic Abu Madyan at Tlemcen (see Chapter 6 below). Royal mausolea were not as

