

Alhambra

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The palace fortress of the Alhambra in Spain is an important structure in Islamic architecture, both historically and politically. This lesson covers:

1. Time Period and Location: The Alhambra
2. The Alhambra
3. Courtyard of the Lions
4. Muqarnas Vault



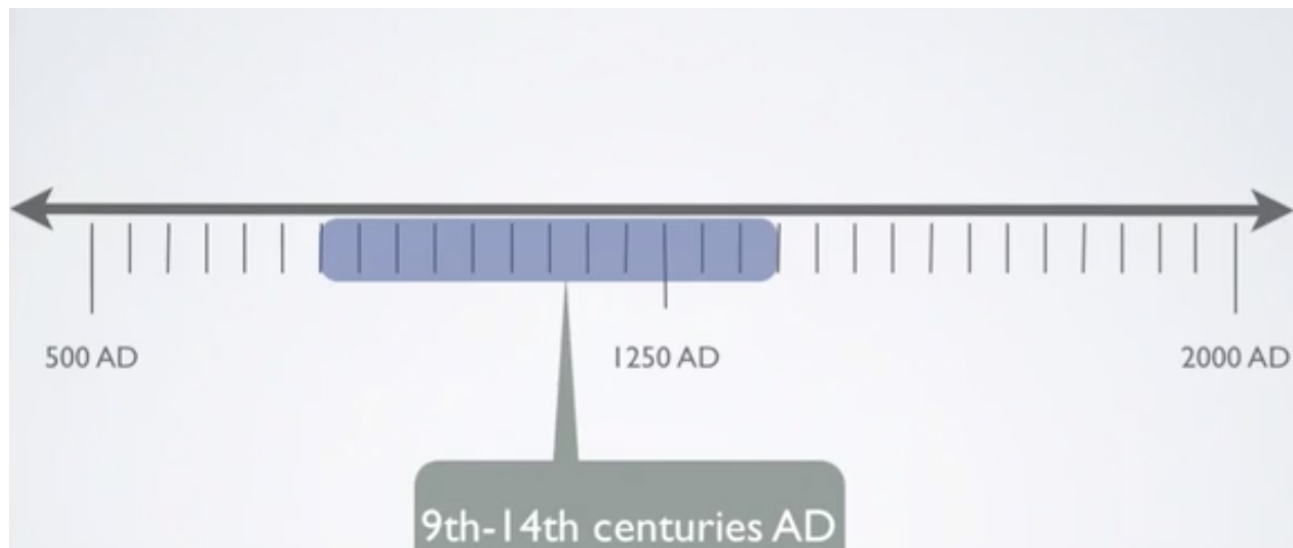
BIG IDEA

The Alhambra is an important example of Islamic architecture in Spain.

1. Time Period and Location: The Alhambra

Like many forms of large-scale architecture, the construction of the Alhambra took place in stages over many centuries and under many rulers, both Christian and Muslim. This lesson focuses on the 9th through 14th centuries. This period largely covers the beginnings of the Alhambra and the muqarnas vault construction from the 14th century. The Alhambra is located just west of the city of Granada in Spain.

The timeline below highlights the period covered in this lesson.



2. The Alhambra

Many ancient buildings were lost to modern times, as they were destroyed by conquering civilizations. The Alhambra, however, is different. This palace fortress is important because it is essentially a time capsule of preserved Nasrid palaces that were built within it. It was preserved even after the Christian reoccupation of Spain.

The Umayyads (who were in power during the construction of the Great Mosque at Córdoba) lost their power in Spain and were overthrown by the Berbers from north Africa in the 11th century. The Berbers eventually fell to the Christians at Córdoba in 1236. The Nasrids ruled southern Spain from 1230 to 1492, when the Christians finally drove the Muslims out for the last time.



DID YOU KNOW

"Alhambra" is actually an Arabic word meaning "red castle," a name that reflects the use of reddish stone in the building's construction. The Alhambra is unusual in that it was never destroyed, in spite of the fact that Spain eventually became a Christian country. Usually, conquerors would destroy the palaces of the leaders they had conquered, seeing no need to maintain them. The kings of Spain maintained the Alhambra as a sort of curiosity.

➔ EXAMPLE Here is an image of the Alhambra:



The Court of the Myrtles, the central courtyard of the Comares Palace at the Alhambra
Granada, Spain
889 CE

The Alhambra was originally constructed as a strategic military fortress with a high vantage point in view of the city. Eventually, palaces were built for the Nasrid rulers inside the walls of Alhambra, some of which still exist today, even after the reconstructions that took place after ownership switched from Muslim to Christian. The palaces create a refuge from the outside world. Their gardens and courtyards blur the lines between interior and exterior space, with areas where one can sit underneath a porch and look at

the gardens outside. In the photo of the Court of the Myrtles above, there is a perfect reflection of the palace in the waters of the fountain, causing confusion between what is real and what is not.

3. Courtyard of the Lions

One of the most impressive buildings within the Alhambra is the Palace of the Lions and the Courtyard of the Lions that resides within it. It is a beautiful marble courtyard, circled by a colonnade with horseshoe-style arches above, which were the chambers where the sultan's wives lived.

The Courtyard of the Lions is typical of Islamic gardens, which evoked the concept of paradise by dividing a space into four quadrants, according to the cardinal directions, with a central element, usually a fountain, in the middle. The word "paradise" comes from the word for a walled garden in Arabic. The fountain would provide a source of water piped in from outside the palace, and its gurgling sound would be particularly refreshing in the arid climates where Islamic gardens existed. They might also be planted with flowers and fruit trees.

The Courtyard of the Lions draws its name from the unusual fountain perched upon 12 stone lions, and it is decorated with a poem by the famous Islamic poet, **Ibn Zamrak**. As people traveled through the arches, they would be led to the Hall of the Abencerrajes and Hall of Two Sisters, where the poet Ibn Zamrak is responsible for other poetic inscriptions within the muqarnas vault. Framing the court is a series of elaborately carved stucco panels above the arches.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Below is an image of the Courtyard of the Lions and the fountain from which the courtyard draws its name.



Courtyard of the Lions

Granada, Spain

1362



TERM TO KNOW

Ibn Zamrak

Famous poet and statesman for Granada, Al-Andalus; his narratives of his writings decorate fountains, i.e., the Fountain of the Lions and palaces.

4. Muqarnas Vault

The Hall of the Abencerrajes is in front of the Hall of Two Sisters, within which is the famous muqarnas vault. **Muqarnas** are stalactite architectural elements that hang down from the ceiling and were likely intended to reflect the sunlight coming into the room, creating abstract patterns. The effect is an ethereal and heavenly quality that contrasts sharply with the military solidity of the outer fortress. The five thousand cells inside the honeycomb vault combine light and shadow to create the effect of a rotating starry sky. The poet Ibn Zamrak composed verses that were inscribed on the walls below:

"And how many arches rise up its vault supported by columns which at night are embellished by light!

You would think that they are the heavenly spheres whose orbits revolve, overshadowing the pillar of dawn when it barely begins to appear after having passed through the night."



DID YOU KNOW

The Hall of the Abencerrajes is actually named after the knights that were supposedly beheaded there.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here is an image of the muqarnas vault:



Muqarnas vault in Hall of the Abencerrajes

Granada, Spain

14th century CE



TERM TO KNOW

Muqarnas

Islamic or Persian architecture; a type of corbel decorative projecting element.



SUMMARY

An important structure in Islamic architecture, both historically and politically, is the palace fortress of the Alhambra in Spain. In this lesson, you explored the **time period and location of the Alhambra**.

To do this, you learned about the **Alhambra** as well as two additional pieces of architecture from this period: the **Courtyard of the Lions** and the **muqarnas vault**. The Courtyard of the Lions resides within the Palace of the Lions. It is a beautiful marble courtyard, circled by a colonnade with horseshoe-style arches above which were the chambers where the sultan's wives lived. The Hall of the **Abencerrajes** is in front of the Hall of Two Sisters, within which is the famous muqarnas vault.

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