

Moorish Architecture: The Legacy of a Vanished Kingdom

Background Notes

Ian Cockburn — 28 January 2026



Patio de los Leones, Alhambra de Granada

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The Alhambra of Granada, the Great Mosque of Córdoba and the Alcazar of Seville are the three most impressive monuments to the architectural creativity of the Moors in Spain, but there are many other examples worthy of mention too. This lecture tells the epic story of the Moorish invasion of the Iberian peninsula and the fascinating architectural culture that they brought with them, and which continued to evolve over the nearly 800 years of Islamic rule in the peninsula. In doing so, it will provide a comprehensive introduction to Moorish architecture, examining its origins and its evolutions, including an explanation of its classical roots. These roots are less well-known than the Moorish architecture itself, but are fascinating to explore. So too is the unique interior decorative style developed by the Moors, which gives their architecture its beauty and exotic appeal – an appeal so strong that the Christians sometimes copied it, even as they slowly reconquered the territory from its Islamic rulers.

The invasion in 711AD by the Umayyad Caliphate of Damascus, aided by Berber tribesmen from the Maghreb, quickly overthrew the ruling Visigothic kingdom and began the nearly 800-year Islamic occupation. The Moors took the entire peninsula, with the exception of the mountainous terrain of Asturias on the north coast, in little over three years. However, the new kingdom, which they called Al-Andalus, was not initially truly unified or centrally controlled, as local warlords gained control of their own 'fiefdoms' and fought each other for territory. In addition, the relationship between the Arabs and the Berbers was somewhat strained. Meanwhile, back in the Arabian peninsula, the ruling Umayyad dynasty was overthrown in 750AD by a rival Islamic dynasty called the Abbasids. One surviving member of the Umayyad royal family, a young prince called Abd al Rahman I, escaped the subsequent massacre and fled west, to the

Maghreb, where he joined his mother's Berber tribe and raised a small expeditionary force, which landed near Almuñecar in 750AD. Being the only surviving member of the Umayyad royal family, he was quickly accepted as the new ruler of Al-Andalus. The fact that he was half Arab and half Berber also helped make him acceptable to both groups of his new subjects. Over the next 30 years he sufficiently pacified and stabilised the kingdom, and raised enough taxes, to start building the first stage of the Great Mosque of Córdoba, initiated in 785AD.



Great Mosque of Córdoba - interior

The Mosque – now called the Mosque-Cathedral Complex - was the first major architectural accomplishment of Al-Andalus. It is a World Heritage Site and is considered to be one of the most beautiful mosques in the world. The hypostyle mosque was built in four stages between 785AD and 987AD, and is the prototype for most Moorish and also Mudejar (hybrid Islamic-Christian-Jewish) architecture. The experience of entering into this hypnotic space can be breath-taking. Its structure and significance can be understood by examining the influences of classical architecture from both the Arabian and the Iberian

peninsulas. Understanding why this iconic building has the impact it does and discovering the secrets hidden in its architecture, its decorative programme and the inscriptions around the Mihrab area, is an exploratory journey that amply rewards the curious mind.

By the tenth century, although a number of small Christian kingdoms had regained territory in the north of the peninsula, Al-Andalus had reached its apogee, especially after the establishment of the Caliphate, in 929AD. The capital, Córdoba became the wealthiest and most culturally advanced city in western Europe. The first Caliph, Abd al Rahman III, had a spectacular palatinate city, called Madinat al-Zahra, built just outside Córdoba. Princes, ambassadors, noblemen and scholars travelled to this fabulous centre of wealth, power and learning, to pay homage to the Caliph and to gain his favour. His son, the second Caliph, Al-Hakham II, was the architectural brains behind the building of the palatinate city and also behind the innovative third stage of the Great Mosque, which we will examine in detail.



Madinat al-Zahara

This period, in the tenth century, has been described as the '*convivencia*' – the relatively peaceful living together of Muslims, Christians and Jews. However, less than a century later, during a Berber rebellion, Madinat al-Zahra was attacked and raised to the ground. The subsequent fall of the Caliphate significantly weakened the kingdom of Al-Andalus and, with no great Caliphal army to hold them in check, the Christian kingdoms that had developed in the north grew more adventurous. A turning point in the burgeoning reconquest came in 1085AD, with the highly symbolic Christian reconquest of the old Visigothic capital of Toledo. Partly as a response, further waves of fierce Islamic invaders arrived from the Maghreb in the 11th and 12th centuries, bringing their own style to the architecture.



Giralda, Seville

They were eventually repelled and were then succeeded by the final Nasrid Kingdom of Granada, a vassal state to the Christian kingdom of Castile and Leon. This final kingdom lasted nearly two hundred and fifty years, a period which saw the creation of the Alhambra fortress-palace.

The beauty of the Alhambra of Granada, built by the Nasrid dynasty in the 13th and 14th Centuries, speaks for itself – or does it? Many visitors, while stunned by the breathtaking architecture, are unaware that the walls, covered in Kufic script, are talking directly to them. We will explore the structure of the monument and the way in which it was used, as well as the delicately beautiful decorative programme of the interior of the two principal remaining Nasrid palaces. We will unlock the hidden meanings in the complex geometry of the glazed tilework and the stalactite-like *muqarnas* plasterwork. We will also take a closer look at the inscriptions, some of them an almost endless repetition of the Nasrid dynastic motto, but many also consisting of exquisite Arabic poetry, with lines where the walls boast of their own beauty or of the metaphorical significance of the architecture.



Mirador de Linderaja, Alhambra de Granada

As the Christian kingdoms pushed further south, the mixture of Islamic, Christian and Jewish influences also produced the hybrid style known as Mudejar. Probably the finest example of this hybrid style, unique to the Iberian peninsula, is the

Alcazar of Seville. This city was the medieval capital of both the Almohad Muslims and later of the resurgent Catholic Kings. The spectacular Alcazar palace and gardens, built over many centuries, contain traces of early Almohad palace architecture in the Patio del Yesso. Later, in the 14th Century, the Christian King Pedro I built his palace there, in the Mudejar style, just after Muhammad V, the deposed Sultan of Granada, spent three years in exile at the court of his good friend, King Pedro. The influence of the Alhambra can be clearly seen in parts of this complex, while the extensive adjoining gardens are amongst the most beautiful you will find anywhere in Spain, (and feature as the 'Water Gardens of Dorne' in the Game of Thrones tv series).



Patio de las Doncellas, Alcazar de Sevilla

Finally, our story ends with the completion of the Christian reconquest of the peninsula, when the boy-king Boabdil, the last Sultan of Granada, surrendered the city to the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabel, in January 1492 – the same momentous year that those two visionary monarchs also sent Christopher Columbus off to discover the New World.

Suggested further reading:

* For an introduction to Islamic architecture in Spain see:

Barracand and Bednorz, *Moorish Architecture in Andalusia*, (Taschen, Cologne, 2007). — Broad coverage and wonderful colour plates.

* For an introduction to the Islamic arts of Spain see:

Jerrilyn Dodds (ed.) *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain* (Metropolitan Museum of New York, 1992) — Extremely good exhibition catalogue.

Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain*, (V&A, London 2010) — Brilliant overview, illustrated with lots of examples from the V&A's superb medieval and islamic collections.

* For an excellent and in-depth introduction to cross-cultural artistic influences in medieval al-Andalus see:

Jerrilyn Dodds et al, *The Arts of Intimacy. Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Making of Castilian Culture*. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press. 2008).

* For an introduction to the idea of '*convivencia*' — the (relatively) peaceful co-existence of Muslims, Christians and Jews in medieval Spain see:

Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World*. (Little, Brown & Company, London. 2001). Very readable, if a little rose-tinted.

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