

Tales of the Alhambra

Architecture, poetry and meaning in fourteenth-century Granada

THE ALHAMBRA

Alhambra = Arabic *al-ḥamrā*, “the red”

1st Comares Palace (Court of the Myrtles)

2nd Comares Palace (Court of the Myrtles)

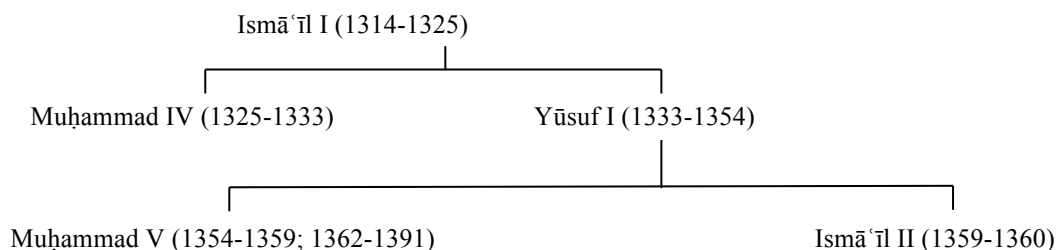
Garden Palace or *Qaṣr al-Riyāḍ* (“Court of the Lions”)

Ismā‘īl I

Yūsuf I

Muḥammad V

THE NAṢRID SULTANS (only those mentioned are shown)



THE POETS OF THE *DĪWĀN AL-INSHĀ'* (only those mentioned are shown)

‘Alī ibn al-Jayyāb (b.1274; d. of plague 1349)

1st career, 1295-1314: apprentice, secretary, head of department

2nd career, 1314-1349: secretary, head of department, vizier, double vizier, i.e. of both the pen (civil administration) and the sword (army).

Ibn al-Khaṭīb (b.1313; d.1374, murdered in prison in Morocco)

1332-1371: apprentice, secretary, personal secretary to the sultan, head of department, vizier, double vizier;

1371-72, fled to Morocco.

Ibn Zamrak (b.1330; d.1393, murdered with his sons)

1354-1393: apprentice, personal secretary to the sultan, head of department, vizier.

THE POEMS

The Arabic texts of these poems, with a Spanish translation and relevant bibliography, are to be found in García Gómez 1985. However, most of the emendations to the Arabic proposed by García Gómez have been ignored, in favour of the text of the inscriptions themselves. The free English translations (by Nadia Jamil and JJ) that follow have been made specially for this lecture; amongst several interweaving strands of meaning, they follow only those most important for the argument proposed.

Poem No. 1

Palace of the Lions, Hall of the Two Sisters. Poems by Ibn Zamrak for Muḥammad V from the two niches in the arch leading to the Mirador of Lindaraja (García Gómez 1985, No.15, pp.121-122 & No.16, pp.122-123).

1A: East Niche

Every art has lent to me its beauty, and given to me splendour and perfection.
Whoever sees me imagines that I always grant the jar what it seeks to attain;
When he contemplates my beauty, it fools his senses;
And he mistakes me for a beneficent halo surrounding the full-moon.

1B: West Niche

I am not alone. I am like a garden in which a wonder grows, the like of which eyes have never seen:
A palace of glass - whoever steps inside stands dismayed, as if on the surface of a fathomless sea.
All this is the work of the imam of the Banī Naṣr, may God perpetuate his glory with a line of kings!
His people attained the highest glory in antiquity for they gave refuge to the Prophet and his people.

Poem No.2

Palace of the Lions, Hall of the Two Sisters. Poem by Ibn Zamrak for Muḥammad V, inscribed around the arches of the Mirador of Lindaraja (García Gómez 1985, No.17, pp.124-127).

I hold in me the crown of splendour from which meteors on the edge of heaven catch their flame.
I am the soothed eye of the garden; the apple of that eye is none but the lord Muḥammad,
blessed with virtue, with the water of generosity, possessed of the most high resounding fame, of the most inspiring
guidance.
He shines forth from the horizon of kingship as the full-moon of guidance; his course shows the way, his brilliance
illuminates it.
He is no less than the sun within its house; whereon everything that is good casts a beneficent shadow.
His royal majesty blazes forth from me whenever he shines from his caliphal throne, and radiates about him;
When he sends forth the noble steed of his gaze to race the wind, whence it returns refreshed
From pleasure gardens for the eyes, where sight is tethered and the intellect hobbled.
There, the breeze always blows fresh cool air, and gives a healthy atmosphere.
..... [lacuna]
The glass horizon displays marvels written on the pages of beauty to be read, and read again;
Their colours are many, but the light itself is one; some will see the many, some the one.

Poem No.3

Palace of the Lions, Hall of the Two Sisters. Poem by Ibn al-Khaṭīb for Muḥammad V inscribed in the band running around the four walls of the Hall (García Gómez 1985, pp.165-170, from an unpublished manuscript in Rabat). After the flight of Ibn al-Khaṭīb in 1372, it was erased and replaced by the poem of Ibn Zamrak which may now be read on the walls (García Gómez 1985, No.14, pp.115-120).

See what a sight for sore eyes am I. Wonder at how architecture and decoration are made one in me;
I am the sole exception to the law that none may marry two sisters.
I was all but lost, until Fortune redeemed me for the true religion.
In fame and glory, I resemble the palace of Khusraw, but how different are our two palaces -
"As different as the two Yazīds" - his fire altars are extinguished by the light of my God.
How skilfully has art contrived to join in me two opposites; has beauty made me one from two contraries.
Of all the buildings of the king, I am the eye; and my master is the apple of that eye.
Muḥammad ibn Abī l-Ḥajjāj, built me as proof that he merits praise, and that's no lie.
His two hands, may they be praised, brought together two opposites, benevolence and ferocity.
He liberated the kingdom wielding double-edged, high-tempered swords in holy war.
He averted the evil of schism when religion was clad in shame and disgrace.
To help him to victory, God loosed the east wind with life-giving rain, and sent down the holy spirit on beating wings.
Glories will forever be combined in me - through God's power of assistance, conquest and victory will be two comrades
in my hall -
Because the utmost desire of my designer was given shape by a Creator utterly remote from any "How?" or "Where?"

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