



I. Political Climate

Although embedded in the vast structure of the Alhambra is a complex layering of divergent ideas about landscape, its Islamic garden palaces are the ultimate expression of landscape within the medieval Islamic political paradigm. A unique blend of climate and heritage collided in Granada in the late 14th Century which allowed Hispano-Islamic knowledge, architecture and art to produce novel atmospheric experiences before the Catholic Monarchs took the Alhambra in 1492, marking the end of the last Moorish dynasty in Iberian Spain. While legions of tourists and academics have scaled the walls of the Alhambra over the past two centuries to experience its atmospheric spaces, a less popular activity has been to situate these experiences within the longer lineage of cultural expressions used by Islamic political power.¹ This chapter aims to take the reader on a brief journey of that lineage, with the hope that a forensic understanding can inspire deeper insights for designing public spaces today.

Figure 1¹ Atlas Catalan (Cresques)

Islamic political rule has always hinged on the blending of religious and political power. At its inception, only rule by an imam or caliph (a descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, although this is frequently the subject of interpretation) could deliver worldly prosperity and eternal salvation to his subjects. “Muhammad blended the qualities of an Arab tribal chief with those of a prophet and lawgiver, thereby generating the unusual fusion of political and religious power which shaped Islamic political theory and thus legitimacy henceforth.”² After Muhammad’s death in 632, successions of his “rightly guided” followers ruled the new Islamic caliphate. As this new empire expanded outward from Medina, it encountered many sedentary kingdoms that were firmly rooted in the idea of hereditary rule.

With the start of the Umayyad dynasty in 661, Islamic political theory absorbed hereditary practices and the idea of one caliph holding ultimate authority over the Muslim world lost sway³. As rival caliphates emerged over the following centuries, notions of power and religious authority grew more diverse and complex. By time the Arabs penetrated Iberia in the 8th Century, power was typically exercised by a triumvirate of *imam/caliph* (claiming the top title of divine power), a *sultan* (a subordinate political-military authority) and an *‘ulamā’* (a subordinate religious authority).⁴

Figure 1² Expansion of Caliphate, 622-750 (after DieBuche)

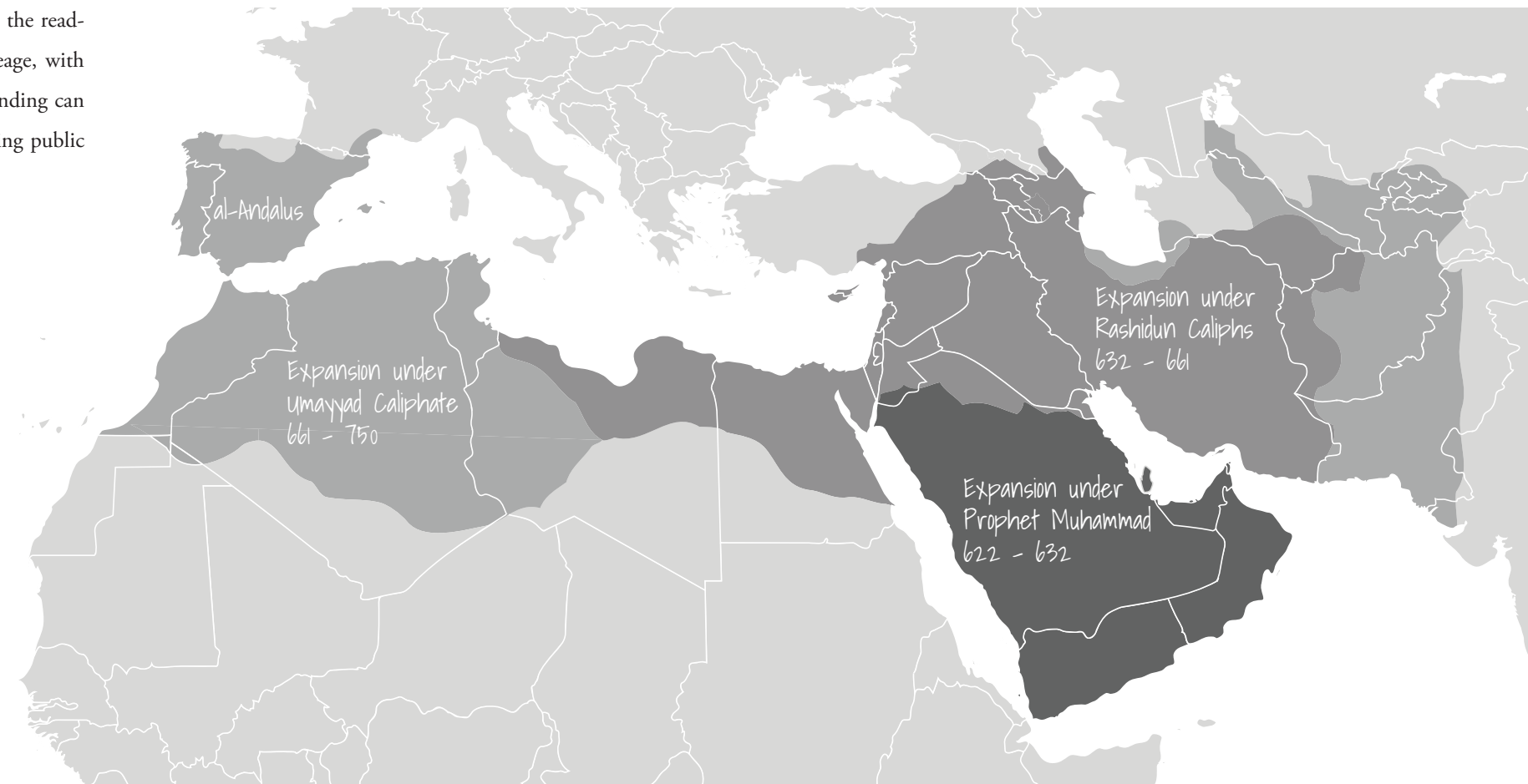
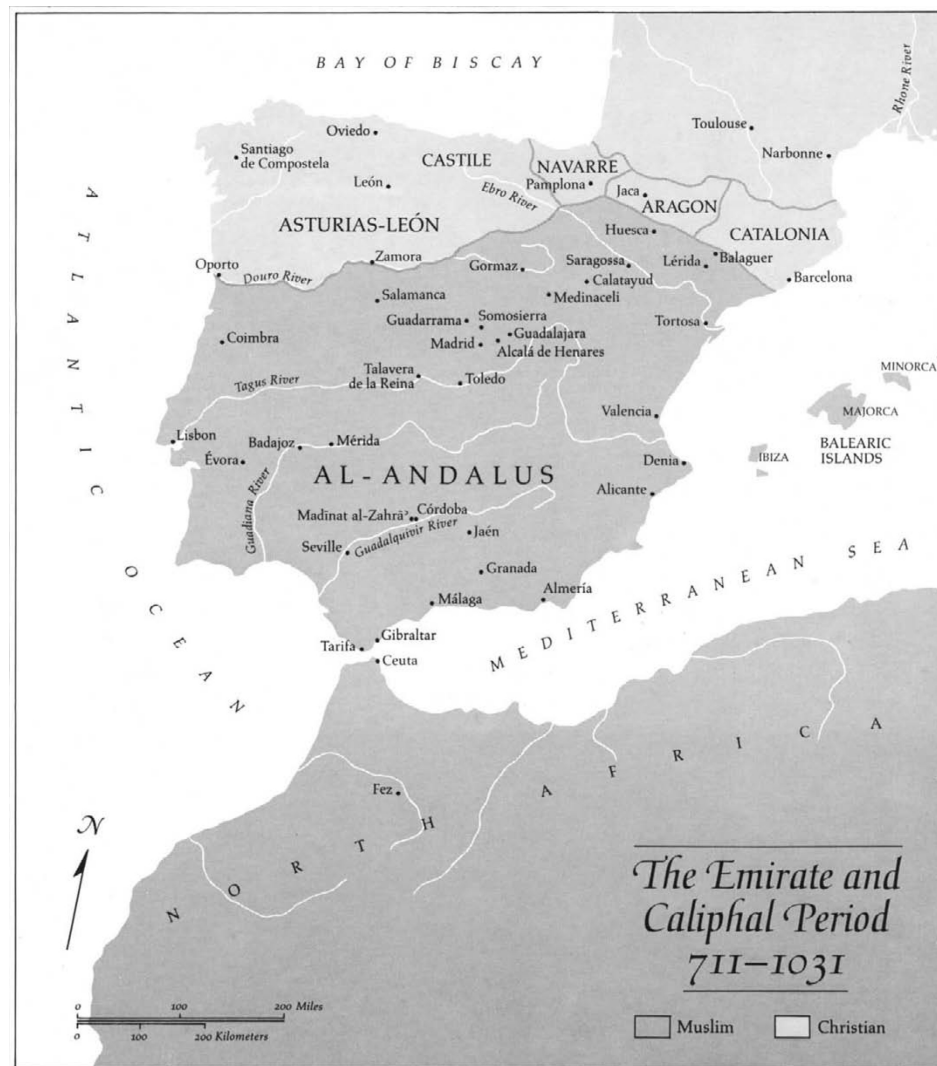




Figure 1³ Andalusian agro-ecosystem, Malaga province. Ploughed wheat fields and olive groves (Fitzwilliam-Hall)

Figure 1⁴ (Dodds)



The immigration into Iberia of ‘Abd al-Rahmān I, the only male ruler to escape alive from the Abbāsīd overthrow of the Umayyad dynasty in Damascus in 750, marked the first contact between the Umayyad religio-political paradigm and the vast, fertile plains of al-Andalus. Accustomed to monarchical rule under the Romans and the Visigoths, native Iberians in fact welcomed rule by their Muslim invaders.⁵ But the new Umayyad state still needed to legitimate itself against its rivals to the north and south, and it did so by importing “artefacts, personelle, and ideas from the east.”⁶

With these imports, the Umayyads would spend the next two centuries converting nearly the entire peninsula into orchards and gardens, allowing Islamic Spain to eclipse the other Muslim caliphates and Medieval European kingdoms economically. By importing climate-appropriate crops and sophisticated water management practices, the Umayyads increased the quality and yield of agricultural outputs, leading to surpluses that produced bustling urban markets. With boosts in trade, agricultural estates could expand their commodification of the landscape and further grow their output. D. Fairchild Ruggles suggests that this led to “a new awareness of the landscape’s potential for economic yield and inhabitability.”⁷ After territorial expansion and conversion of the majority of native Iberians to Islam, the Umayyads centralized



Figure 1⁵ Portico and Gardens, Madinat al-Zahra’ (Paulo)

their monarchy as the Córdoba Caliphate in 929. The caliphate’s first ruler, Abn ar-Rahmān III al-Nasir, grounded his religio-political claims in eastern traditions.⁸

Abn-ar-Rahmān III al-Nasir articulated his political and religious legitimacy with ornate structures and gardens in Córdoba, culminating in the palatine city of *Madinat al-Zahrā’*.⁹ At this new capitol outside of Córdoba, the caliphate diverted mountain water for irrigation and mixed gardens together with orchards for the dual purpose of enjoyment and profit. It drew from the “sophisticated palace architecture” at the ‘Abbāsīd court in Baghdad, creating gardens by using irrigation channels to border paved walkways in an enclosed space.¹⁰ It also utilized existing terrain to terrace the palace, so that an observer in the enclosed, upper structures could gaze down upon the lower gardens, while an observer in the lower gardens could admire the landscape beyond.

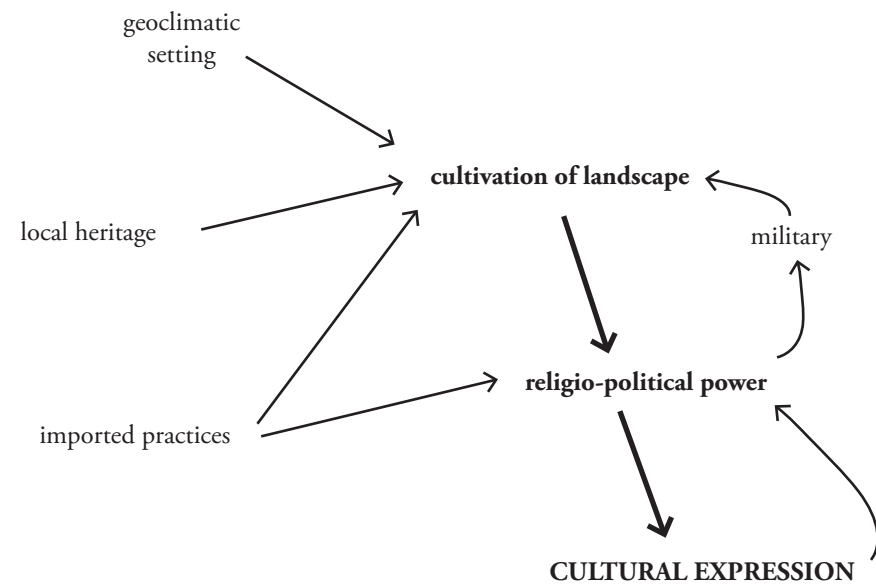
Historically, the Islamic garden encoded the system of “social, political, and economic values placed on the land” and visually choreographed this for the caliph and his court. To have a garden fit for symposia that explore Socratic notions of worldly love meant that you were a master at modifying your vast territory. The geometrical structure of the Islamic garden—axes and intersections punctuated with water features—not only represented the rivers of paradise in the Quran¹¹, but it served as a royal symbol of “the performance of water



Figure 1⁶ The Story of Bayad and Riyād (Maler)

as the political-economic foundation of the irrigated society.”¹²

Indeed, 10th Century Córdoba saw itself as “heir and reviver” of the 8th and 9th Century glory of Baghdad. By importing cultural fruits that were all but dying in Iraq, Umayyad Córdoba became a safe haven for Baghdadi studies of Greek and Roman writing, the emancipation of courtly women and metropolitan Jews, and love and nature poetry. From its economic prosperity and its collision with a remnant Western chivalry, Córdoba also experienced an “emancipation” of the senses, especially the *visual*, which led to a new architectural vernacular that encompassed gardens and representational plastic art. As a result of this, nature poetry began to deal with buildings and artificial landscapes. Along with a tolerant version of Islam, the combined cultural milieu contributed to a strong Andalusian nationalism that helped



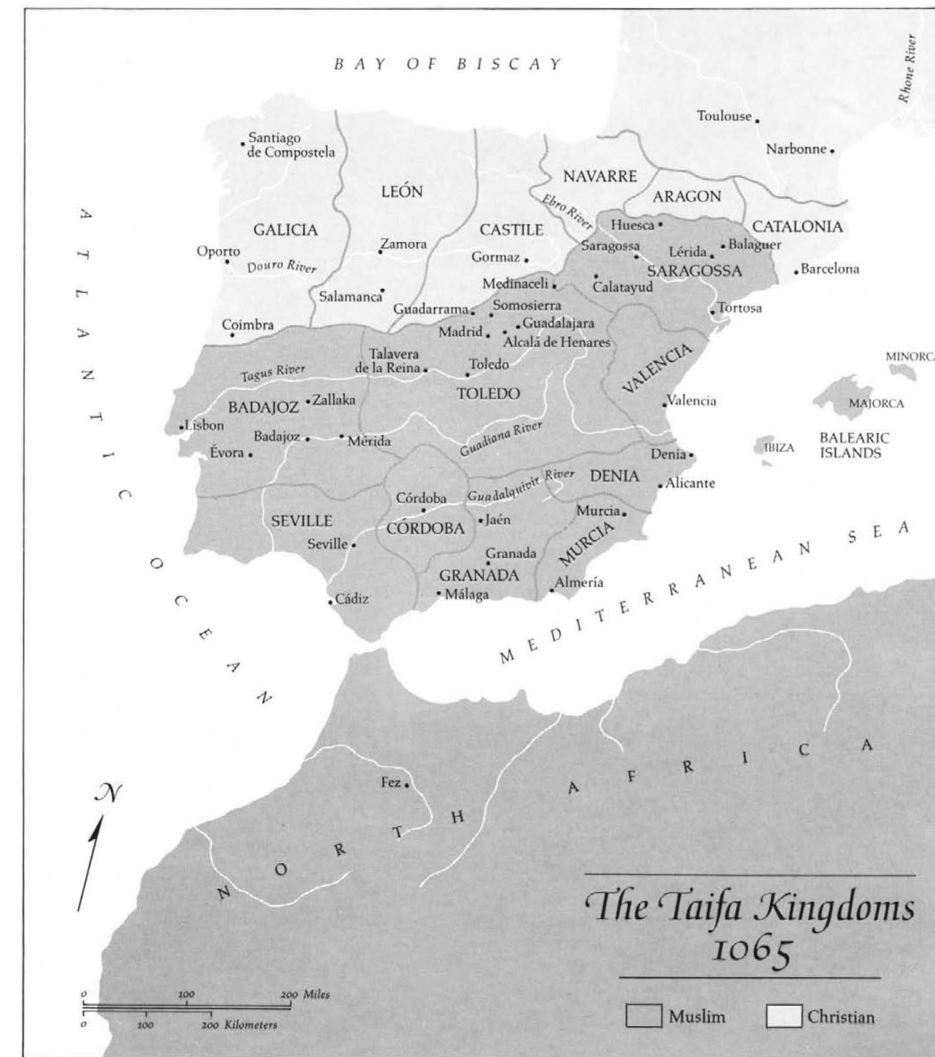
fend off multiple generations of aggression from the Berbers in Northwest Africa and Christian kingdoms in Northern Iberia.¹³

After the fall of *Madinat al-Zahrā* and the Umayyad dynasty in 1010, its garden template disseminated to the capital cities of the succeeding Taifa kingdoms. Many of their garden palaces were also built on elevated sites. One such site—the Sabika hill—loomed over the Jewish settlement of *Gharnata al-Yahud*, or Granada. Yusuf ibn Naghrālla, a Jewish vizier who escaped Córdoba after the fall of the Umayyads, was inspired to build the hill’s first structure as a palace with Solomonic symbolism.

The tale of Solomon’s Ring must have resonated with Naghrālla, for Solomon’s ring enabled him to understand the language of plants and animals and to command his subjects to build for him “miraculous palaces of congealed air and water.”¹⁴

The Zirids, ruling the Granada-based Taifa kingdom between 1013 and 1090, brought ibn Naghrālla’s dream to life. In 1052-1056, his grandson Samuel ibn Naghrālla rebuilt, enlarged and joined this palace to Granada. But as the Taifa of Toledo fell to the Christian kingdom of Castille to the north, the Almoavids invaded from the south. The Almoavids, a Berber dynasty from Marakesh, Morocco, ruled Islamic Iberia between 1040-1157. They fell to Almohads, who also ruled from Marakesh until 1269. After the dissolution of the Almohads, only one small Islamic kingdom remained: the Nasrid Emirate of Granada, which rooted itself firmly in Arab culture. According to Ruggles,

Figure 1⁷ (Dodds)



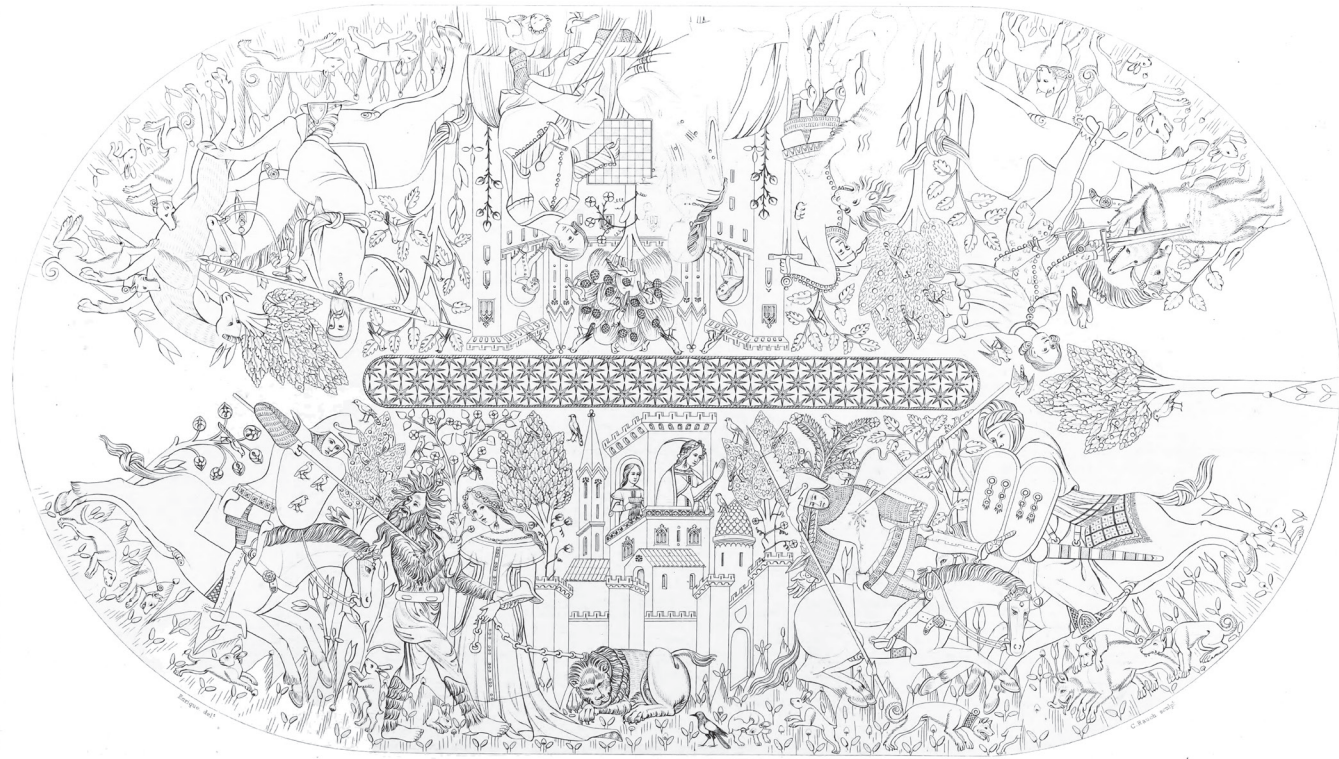
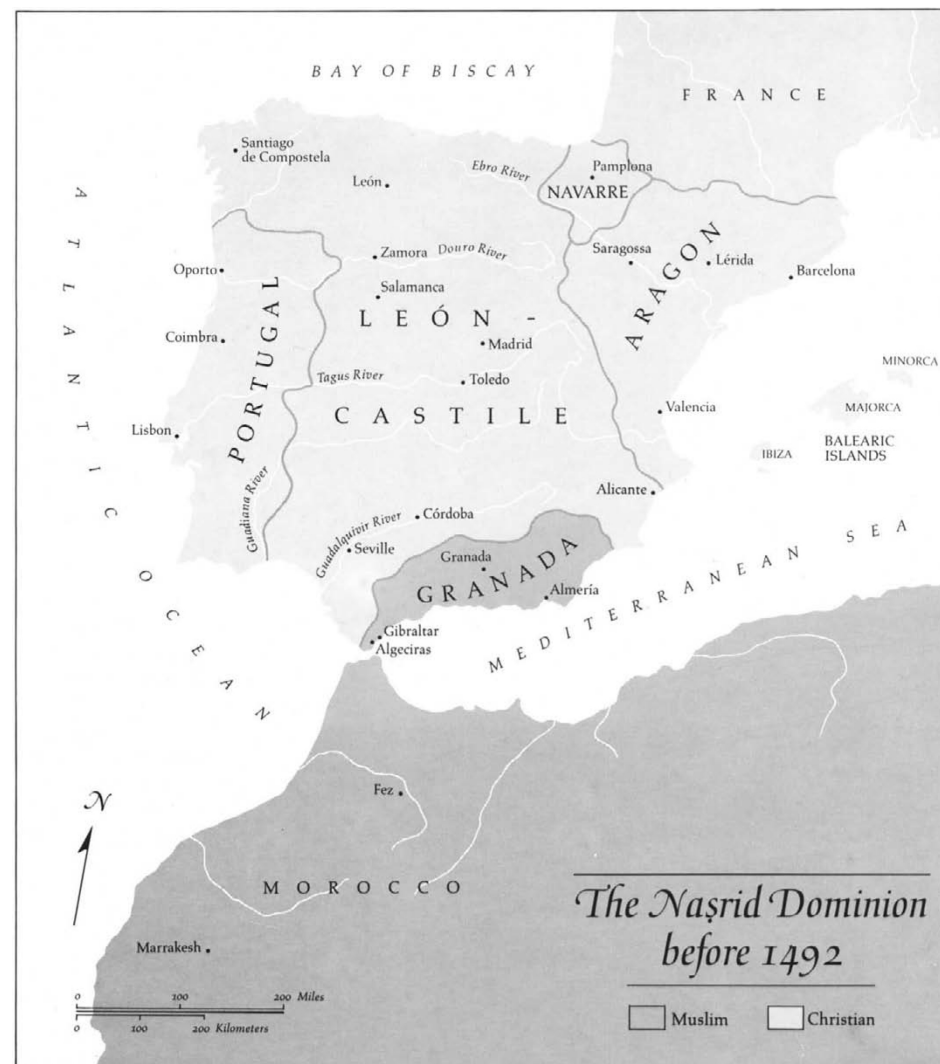


Figure 1⁸ Painting on the Ceiling of the right alcove of the Hall of Justice (Goury, Jones and Gayangos)

Figure 1⁹ (Dodds)



The Nasrids chose the model of Umayyad Cordoba to evoke their Arab past, an ethnic distinction that differentiated them from the Berber Almohads, their predecessors, and gave them a legitimacy that was sorely needed as they balanced themselves between Christian Castile and the Berber Merinids of Morocco.¹⁵

Yet within this tight spot, a tiny dynasty, the Nasrids of Granada, composed exquisite pages of culture which, despite its established patterns, had never achieved this level of aesthetics and erudition.¹⁶

References

- 1 Bennisson and British Academy, *The Articulation of Power in Medieval Iberia and the Maghrib*. 5.
- 2 Ibid. 10.
- 3 Ibid. 11.
- 4 Ibid. 13.
- 5 Ibid. 15.
- 6 Ibid. 14.
- 7 Dodds, *Al-Andalus*. 163.
- 8 Bennisson and British Academy, *The Articulation of Power in Medieval Iberia and the Maghrib*. 13.
- 9 Ibid. 16.
- 10 Dodds, *Al-Andalus*. 165.
- 11 O'Hara, "Moorish to Modern."
- 12 Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*. 163.
- 13 Bargebuhr, *The Alhambra*. 31.
- 14 Ibid. 31.
- 15 Ruggles, *Gardens, Landscape, and Vision in the Palaces of Islamic Spain*. 167.
- 16 Salmerón Escobar and Kelham, *The Alhambra*. 54.

Figure 1¹⁰ Patio de Arrayanes (Wilhelm von Gail)

