

Alhambra

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

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



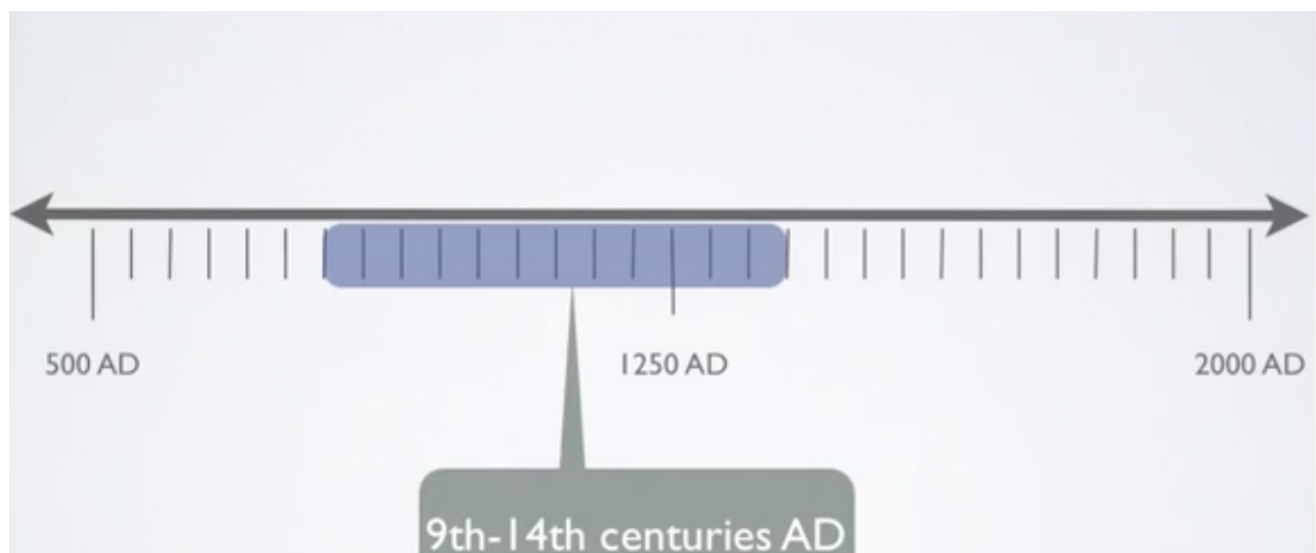
BIG IDEA

Alhambra is an important example of Islamic architecture in Spain.

1. Time Period and Location: Alhambra

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

The timeline below highlights the period covered in this lesson.



2. Alhambra

Many ancient buildings were lost to modern times as they were destroyed by conquering civilizations. Alhambra, however, is different. This palace fortress is important because it is essentially a time capsule of

preserved Nazarid palaces that were built within it. It was preserved even after the Christian reoccupation of Spain.



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.

Alhambra gives us an impression of what royal life was like in Islamic Spain under the Nazarids, who were the last Arabian Muslim dynasty in Spain. They lost their hold on the Iberian Peninsula with the final battle of Granada in 1492.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Here is an image of Alhambra:



Alhambra

889 AD

Granada, Spain

It was originally constructed as a strategic military fortress with a high vantage point in view of the city. Eventually palaces were built for the Nazarid 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.

3. Courtyard of the Lions

One of the most impressive buildings within 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 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.

➞ **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

1362

Granada, Spain



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.



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

14th century AD

Granada, Spain



TERMS TO KNOW

Muqarnas

Islamic or Persian architecture, a type of corbel decorative projecting element

Mirador

Spanish; an architectural term; a balcony built on an upper floor to assist with an open view



SUMMARY

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

To do this, you learned about **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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TERMS 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.

Mirador

Spanish, an architectural term, a balcony built on an upper floor to assist with an open view.

Muqarnas

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