

UNDERSTANDING ARCHITECTURAL CHANGE AT THE
ALHAMBRA: STRATIGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE
WESTERN GALLERY, COURT OF THE MYRTLES

*Camilla Mileto and Fernando Vegas**

The Alhambra, fortress and residence of the Nasrid rulers of Granada, comprises three main areas: the citadel (Alcazaba), the palaces, and the gardens. Although the origins of the fortress date from the ninth century, most of the buildings and palaces which stand today can be dated between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This group of buildings was constructed by the Nasrids, the last dynasty to rule al-Andalus before the conquest of the Catholic Monarchs in 1492. The Alhambra not only includes buildings conceived or modified during the Islamic period, but also later additions and interventions, which responded to forces of fashion, functional adaptation, stylistic restoration, or simple mending. These interventions began with the conquest of Granada and have continued to the present day.

The present study, commissioned by the Patronato de la Alhambra, is part of a broader research project, begun in 2000, in which historians, geologists and architects are collaborating in applying the methodology of stratigraphic analysis of architecture to this monument for the first time, in order to elucidate the transformation of the Alhambra palaces during their long history. The present study focuses on the upper gallery of the western nave of the Court of the Myrtles, part of the Comares Palace, that was cut off at its southern end when the Renaissance palace was built. The area under discussion is delimited by the Mexuar and the Comares Palace at one end, and the Palace of Charles V at the other. This area of the Alhambra complex is of particular interest to researchers seeking to better understand the physical connection between the Nasrid palaces and the magnificent Renaissance palace constructed on the order of Charles V, King of Spain and Holy Roman

* The research team for this project is formed by Camilla Mileto (architect), Fernando Vegas López-Manzanares (architect), José Manuel López Osorio (architectural technician), Miguel Ángel Sorroche Cueva (historian), and Francisco Martín Peinado (geologist). This article was translated from the Spanish by Elizabeth Power.

Emperor (1516–1556). He inherited from his grandparents, Ferdinand and Isabella, a vast kingdom encompassing Spain, the new territories in America, Austria, the Low Countries, and Southern Italy. He planned that Granada would be the capital of his empire, and the Alhambra his main headquarters, and ordered the new palace to be built as an extension of the Nasrid palaces.

The Comares Palace was built by the Nasrid Sultan Muḥammad V (1354–1359 and 1362–1391), although the first constructions in this part of the palace complex were ordered by his grandfather Ismāʿīl I (1314–1325) and his father Yūsuf I (1333–1354). An interesting description of the palace, written in 1362 by Ibn al-Khaṭīb (1313–1374), the Nasrid prime minister and court chronicler, describes the building process of this palace, and its first configuration.¹ At that time, it seems, the rooms in the upper gallery of the western nave were probably used as residential quarters by the women of the court.² The residence underwent later extensions and alterations, especially after the arrival of the Catholic Monarchs, who freely adapted the buildings to new functions and requirements. For example, among the minor changes made soon after the conquest, new rooms for the king and governors were built in a new storey over the existing Mexuar, which was itself transformed from its Islamic function of court of justice into royal chapel. In 1526, Charles V decided to build a large palace alongside the Nasrid palaces, which was internally connected to them (Fig. 1). It is not known how many and what kind of buildings were destroyed in order to make room for his palace, but the most recent studies show that the major spaces of the Comares Palace were respected, and that an attempt was made to integrate the two palaces, despite the aesthetic clash between this massive new architectural volume, and the rather delicate appearance of the Nasrid palaces.³

¹ For a more detailed analysis of Ibn al-Khaṭīb's text from an architectural viewpoint, see Ángel López López and Antonio Orihuela Uzal, "Una nueva interpretación del texto de Ibn al-Jatib sobre la Alhambra en 1362", *Cuadernos de la Alhambra* 26 (1990), pp. 121–144.

² This point was suggested by Leopoldo Torres Balbás, and can be found in Carlos Vélchez Vélchez, *La Alhambra de Leopoldo Torres Balbás. Obras de Restauración y Conservación 1923–1936* (Granada: Comares, 1988), p. 159. The original text is in *Proyecto de Reparación de la Nave de Poniente del Patio de los Arrayanes*, 25–03–1925, Archivo Central de Administración del Estado (Alcalá de Henares, L-13.179–4).

³ Antonio Malpica Cuello, Eva Moreno León, Eva Martín López, and Jesús Bermúdez López, "El subsuelo. Acerca de la implantación del Palacio de Carlos V. Informe