

STARS AND THE SUPERSENSORY: NASRID SUFISM

The Application of the Philosophy of Ibn al-Khatib in the Alhambra's Architecture

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To look beyond the mundane is to see the poetry etched onto the walls of the Alhambra as a series of incantations, to see the ornaments surrounding such spells as sigils. The rulers of this palace, the Nasrids, cultivated a society of scholarship—to unveil the purpose behind its art and architecture is to understand what the society believed in, and what it hoped to achieve politically. Seen from Cordoba to Granada, mysticism permeates al-Andalus. Manifested in the form of spiritually charged ornament, Nasrid and Umayyad leaders wielded this mysticism to channel godly power. While the Umayyads repurposed the statues of embodied deities, I propose that the Nasrids employed more abstract imagery to obstruct obvious identification of star-like symbols with sigils. This differentiation in decoration can be attributed to Ibn al-Khatib, poet and philosopher within the Nasrid court, who argued that the supersensory identification of a physical object's spiritual power

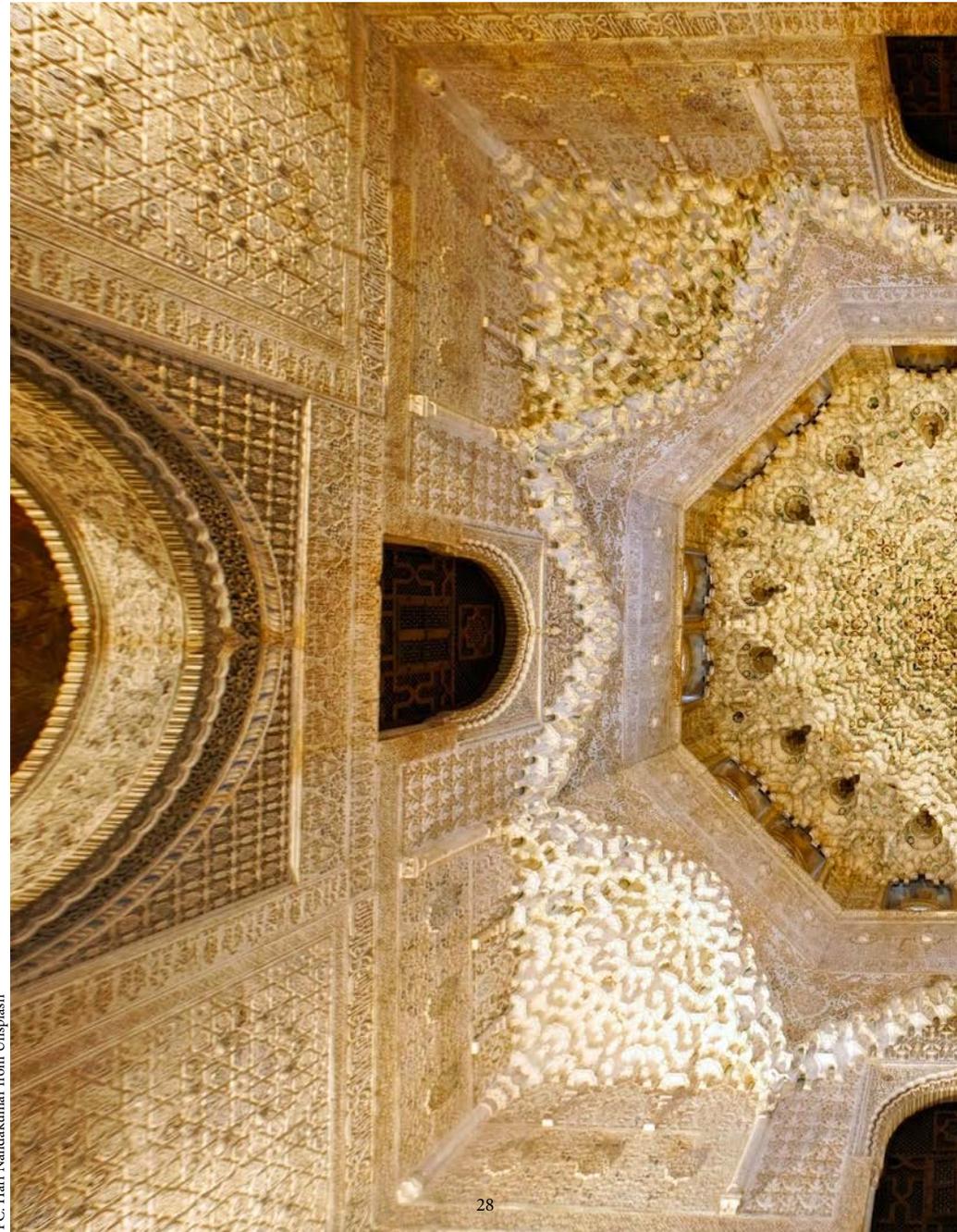
is a form of divine witnessing that aligns the observer with virtuosity, and, subsequently, heavenly favor. Thus, the application of this mystic wisdom provides both a literal and figurative foundation for the Nasrid stragem to deliver sultans to the divine and legitimize their leadership through the exclusivity of understanding their religiously suffused symbols.

Sigils and Their Functions

These celestial sigils are manifested through the perpetual iterations of the Alhambra's poetry. Andalusí author Al-Quartajanni asserted that poetry should not compare, but rather create, images.¹ Embracing this philosophy, the poetry in the Hall of the Two Sisters references the Pleiades, Orion, the full moon, and brilliant stars.² Through the act of speaking the surrounding engravings into ex-

istence, this poetry possesses arcane abilities and impersonates the almighty Himself—heeding the command of al-Quartajanni, “creating” the images of which the poem speaks like runic inscriptions. Through this impersonation of godlike attributes, the Nasrids operate on the assumption “concerning the possibility of Creator and created being united in mystical union” where such “qualities were considered transferable from deity to devotee, in this case the Nasrid sultan.”³ In commanding the stars into existence through poetry, the Nasrids tightened the proximity between man and deity to reinforce the sultan's rule by divine right.

The star-like ornament within the Hall of Two Sisters is projected onto the doorways along the north and south walls, as well as the stellar shapes that form the famed cupola. The images act not only as a *depiction* of the heavens, but as an *invocation* that “establish[es] the ‘connection with the celestial bodies and the reception of their rays closer



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which enable[s the Nasrids] to achieve or destroy what [they] wish.”⁴ The Nasrids employed the use of these symbolic stars to siphon off sacred power, enhancing their strengths in a mystical context—a declaration of their intellectual and political capacity.

However, this channeling of “solar power” was not limited to the Alhambra. An earlier example of the celebration of the celestial comes from the tenth century palace of Madinat al-Zahra. The southern gates of this Cordoban palace were topped by female statues proposed to represent personifications of the planet Venus and Virgo constellation. Used apotropaically, these statues were placed on the entryway to protect those inside the gates. Also at the site, excavated fragments of the Sarcophagus of the Gate of Hades feature two philosophers accompanied by two muses. These muses “are personifications of all the types of knowledge which can ennoble the soul and purify it through a sort of spiritual *katharsis* in order for it to access the kosmos and the only wisdom.” This “access [to] the kosmos” implies that this representation of the muses mimics the power siphoned by the stars of the Alhambra. The Umayyads, like the Nasrids, were so concerned with obtaining this “wisdom” because it “was the consequence of divine inspiration...and became a means of attaining knowledge of the divine.”⁵ The sarcophagi and statues work in tandem to function in the same manner as the sigils—intellectual tools designed to bring their creators

to divinity through achieving wisdom by the grace of the intermediate cosmos above.

The Grenadian Philosophy

To understand how these mystical artworks function on a philosophical level, Andalusí academic Ibn al-Khatib’s *Rawdat al-Ta’rif bil-Hubb al-Sharif* argues that objects operate on multiple planes: the sense-oriented, the imaginative, and the rational. The first level relates to what is perceived without the need for imaginative analysis while the second recognizes the existence of the object in a purely metaphysical sense. This third level “involves the mystical aspirant’s intellect contacting and even identifying with the sensible object’s nonsensical ‘spiritual’ properties.” Thus, the physical ornament represents this first level, the sensible element of the object describing its tangible qualities. The second-level, nonsensible properties associated with these objects are what define them as ‘sigils’—it is their ability to contact the heavens above that exists in the imaginative realm. The third level challenges the “subject’s ability to achieve a certain supersensory perception and ‘witnessing’ of the sensory world’s nonsensible ‘spiritual realities.’” The identification of the object alongside its spiritual properties engages one’s ‘supersensory perception’ and transcends both sense-ori-

ented and imaginative epistemology. Thus, it is supersensory perception that reveals virtuous objects “such as beauty” to the observer “as they are manifested in the sensory objects of the phenomenal world.” The identification of such virtuous objects serves as witness to God’s agency; the union of the physical and the spiritual is an act performed exclusively by the “loving gnostic.”⁶ To distinguish the Nasrids as “loving gnostics” is to identify both with piety and power, which is the ultimate goal of their architecture’s ornament.

The *Rawdat al-Ta’rif bil-Hubb al-Sharif* establishes the need for exclusivity in the identification of virtuous objects. In that, through limited use of inhuman ornamentation, the understanding of the stars seen throughout the Hall of Sisters as mystical objects is limited to those of the Grenadian intelligentsia—thus the “loving gnostics” are constrained to those allied with the Nasrid court. So, while the Cordobans had their own form of celestially charged spolia throughout the ruins of their palace, their apotropaism

is too literal. The connection between relics and religious power lacks effective supersensory identification because, while they are objects with metaphysical qualities, their protective properties are too easily understood—thus, they do not exclusively align those in power with virtuosity and, in the process, do not bolster the legitimacy of Cordoban leadership.

The Stars of the Hall of Two Sisters

The longest poem located on the walls of the Alhambra can be found above the dado within the Hall of Two Sisters. Such a poem is highlighted by ataurique detailing framing its phrases, which are further subdivided by the stars the poem itself references (fig. 1). The poem describes the “five Pleiades,” “Orion [who] stretches his hand out to greet her,” “the full moon [who] approaches [the Alham-

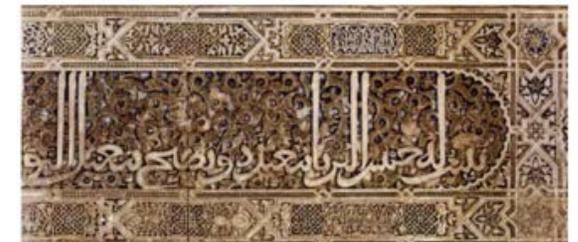


Fig. 1. Agustín Núñez Guarde, ‘A portion of the poem above the dado in the Hall of Two Sisters,’ in *Reading the Alhambra: A Visual Guide Through its Inscriptions*, by José Miguel Puerta Vilchez (The Alhambra and Generalife Trust and EDILUX s.l., 2010).

bra] to converse,” and “the brilliant stars [who] wish to remain in [the Alhambra], and cease to turn in the heavens.” The perpetual incantation of Alhambra’s poetry by its physical presence on the walls serves as a spell to continually visualize the imagery of the poem.

If these sigils operate as the means to collect the power of the divine, then the rays of starlight act as the medium in which that power is transmitted. In the Quran, the stars are said to bow, but this “act of prostration here is not literal but indicates the stars’ casting down influences to earth and being the efficient causes of the generation of all terrestrial things.”⁴ This act of prostration is then more akin to the light that shines down from the heavens, reaching out like fingers severing the clouds.



Fig. 2. William Keighley, “Interior: view of Hall of the Two Sisters from south,” 1969, The Image Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This illumination is reflected in the poetry of the Alhambra as “Orion stretches his hand out to greet her, and the full moon approaches her to converse”—with the possessive pronoun “her” referring to the palace itself.² The hand of Orion represents the constellation’s fleeting starlight, reaching towards the palace, seeking the sigils in which it will be captured. The full, bright moon beams toward the Earth to “converse” with the mystics who devised this method of calling upon the skies above. The poetry works to both create the images it describes and explain the interaction made possible by their creation—as mystical tools, the sigils’ origination, as well as purpose, is rooted in magic. In this example, recognizing the interrelation between the poetry, imagery, and reference to the Quran requires a multilevel understanding of Nasrid-specific poetic and artistic philosophy that would have been restricted to those capable of the supersensory identification because of this nuance.

The poem goes on to reference the “many arches” that “rise up high upon columns wrapped in light!” and “seem to be arches of turning celestial spheres that even cast a shadow upon the pillar of the dawn.” By alluding to the architecture of the Alhambra, the poetry associates the arches (fig. 2) with “celestial spheres” that can clearly be identified as stars or planets, emanating light—the vessel for the transfer of divine

power. At the entrance of the Hall, these two arches can be found adorned with their own poetic lyrics in the niches of the jambs, explaining that “these arches resembling stars are the work of he who makes kings noble. It is as though their vase were a king with a panegyric threaded into his crown.”² Furthering this connection, the poetry more clearly ties the arches to the stars as it continues to say that the vase found in the niche of the arch resembles a king whose crown is made of textual praise—which may be a very self-aware connection to the sigils birthed into existence by the text that invokes them. The poem also claims that these arches, which resemble the sigils seen throughout the Hall, can be attributed to “he who makes kings noble,” or, more concisely, God. This accreditation to God can be interpreted as a way of explaining the process of divine witnessing, that God bestows nobility upon those with the ability to recognize the resemblance between the art and architecture of the Alhambra on multiple planes—the next being the supersensory identification of the stars as containers of celestial energy. Hence, this is why the use of sigils relates to the legitimization of the Nasrid throne, because the nobility of their king is dependent on God making them so; which is done, presumably, through divine witnessing of His agency that destroys the “ontological boundaries separating the

cognitive subject and spiritual objects.”⁶

The cupola (fig. 3) within the Hall represents yet another architectural allusion to the sigils found throughout. Crowning the Alhambra, the cupola forms around one central star from which another star emanates out, like pulsing waves of starlight. The aforementioned poem above the dado refers to the “splendid, matchless cupola, whose hidden and revealed beauty you will see” and in it “such splendor does the chamber acquire that the palace competes with the very firmament.”² The reference to “hidden and revealed beauty” mimics the division of apparent realities (*zāhir*) and hidden realities (*Bātin*) made by Ibn al-Khatib in his treatise.⁶ Khatib establishes that the loving gnostic transcend the *zāhir* as they attempt to achieve a form of divine witnessing within the realm of *Bātin*. In this way,

the poetry effectively defines the purpose of the cupola and synthesizes the connection between star imagery and supersensory perception. The poem persists in its religious allusion, referring to the tangible division of the earth and heavens. Through this allusion, the cupola is then situated within the “cosmological conception preferred by the Nasrid intelligentsia, which allows for the transmission of qualities directly from the deity to his creators” mimicking, in its series of emanated stars, the concentric circles that “were the very motors of creations, transmitters of divine attributes, first to the circle of fixed stars that surround them and then on to the other levels of creation.”³ Consequently, through the poetic comparison of the cupola to the firmament, within the cosmos at large, the palace continues to blur the separation between realities, realms, and perceptions



Fig. 3. Elizabeth Barlow Rogers, “Hall of the Two Sisters, Court of the Lions, interior,” 1996, Foundation for Landscape Studies.

that can only be deciphered by the palace’s patrons.

Conclusion

Through the consistent use of abstract ornamentation, the Nasrid sultanate exercises this concept of supersensory perception in order to imbue these ordinary stars with meaning imperceptible by those not allied with the sultanate. The celestial bodies thus become ambiguous representations of the godlike attributes of the Nasrids as well as references to what they believe to be their place within the cosmos, above their countrymen and among the concentric circles within the realms of heaven. The architecture, in conjunction with the ornament, of the Alhambra creates this notion of a heaven on earth, continuing to blur the lines between the physical and metaphysical. It is the philosophy outlined by the *Rawdat al-Ta’rif bil-Hubb al-Sharif* that provides the Nasrids with this distinct ability to empower themselves through abstraction in comparison to the more corporeal nature of visual language of the Madinat al-Zahra. This same philosophy allows the ornament to also become a tool of legitimization, to prove the virtuosity and divinely-ordained power of the ruling dynasty.