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## Historic context

The Muslim medina of Ronda was at its most resplendent in the period in which the Nasrid kingdom of Granada (13th c.- 15th c.) was the last Islamic stronghold in the Iberian Peninsula.

Its strategic position, between the Castilian and Nasrid regions, converted this city into the most western stronghold of the kingdom and as such it was an obligatory step in the relations between Granada and North Africa, via the Strait of Gibraltar.

Given this, the Sultan of Granada valued Ronda greatly, an importance that was reflected in its architecture, with palatial houses such as the Giant's House, and these baths, probably the best preserved in Spain.

## The Arab Baths

The hamman or bath is the Muslim adaptation of the ancient Roman baths, consisting of the same system of reception, three rooms for bathing, cold, temperate and hot, under floor heating (hypocaust) and heater. Whilst the Romans would immerse themselves into the water, the Arab baths were predominately used as steam baths, although small pools have also been found.

The origins of this type of establishment are firmly rooted within the Islamic culture, and its proliferation in both the urban and rural environment is as a result of the two functions of the baths, the religious ritual and the hub of social life for the city. It was obligatory

step for all "outsiders" who visited the city to first use it as an antechamber, as if it were a great mosque. As such, it is not unusual to find Arab baths close to the gates to the city, as is the case here in Ronda. The baths were beside the Bridge Gate, which no longer exists.

In the absence of the other ruins or remains of the "barrio" of San Miguel, the baths seem to be situated outside of the city; this was not the case during the Middle Ages. This area enjoyed the splendour of an Islamic artisan and agricultural suburb, where businesses such as potteries and tanneries were found. This has influenced the street names of the area, for example Tanners Bridge, Weavers Gate and Potteries Road. We can therefore imagine this "barrio" full of small shops and workshops, a labyrinth of streets and alleys surrounded by the city wall, where the baths would be just another part of urban scenery.

It is true that even when picturing the baths in the "barrio" that its size does not correspond with baths intended only for a small proportion of the local population. For which reason it is believed that a building of such design was the most important of its kind in the Islamic era. There are two main reasons, the first and foremost is the need for a constant supply of water, which is fundamental to a bath of this size, this is only possible in Ronda, close to one of its rivers where there is abundant water. The second reason is that there were at least four other baths of lesser importance, as cited in the Libro de Repartimientos, some of which were in the medina, now known as the "ciudad" or old town.



Its system was based on two vital aspects, the collection and distribution of water. To enable access to the water a wheel was built at the point where the Culebras stream and the Guadalevín River converge. From there the water was directed through a small aqueduct to the first area, the wood store, where the boiler was also found, as was a small tank which stored the water before being sent to the cold room, which was located at the opposite end of the building. It must be noted that, being steam baths it was not the water that was heated (only a small amount in the boiler) but the air, sending heat via the under floor heating (hypocaust) to the hot room (next to the wood store) and the warm room which was the larger of the two. The steam was achieved by emptying buckets of water over the burning floor of the first room. The previously mentioned water tank served as a store of water from which the buckets were filled.

Finally, was the reception room, the start and end of the bathing process, consisting of toilet and dressing room set around a small pool. A domed ceiling supported by cruciform pillars and arches would have covered this room. The current structure is partially reconstructed. During the last archaeological excavations in the foyer area, the remains of the original access stairs to the hammam as well as the remains of the latrine were unearthed.

