

# VISIGOTHS, ASTURIANS AND MOSSARABS. APPROACHING EARLY MEDIEVAL IBERIAN ARCHITECTURE THROUGH CONTEMPORARY TRENDS OF THOUGHT

EDUARDO CARRERO SANTAMARÍA  
UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA  
SPAIN

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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, scholars have reviewed how architectural knowledge was transmitted between the 5th and 11th centuries in Late Antique and Early Medieval Iberia. Yet the architecture of the Iberian Peninsula during these centuries was neither cultural unified nor stylistically homogenous. This long period of more than five centuries includes the creation of the Visigothic realm, the arrival of the Muslims on the Peninsula, and the growth of different Christian kingdoms. Each of these periods has been the subject of contested debate by modern scholars set on imposing different but equally neat and orderly narratives on the transition of one culture to the next. This article outlines this historiography and considers such narratives have influenced the interpretation of Late Antique and Early Medieval church architecture in the Iberian Peninsula.<sup>1</sup>

## KEYWORDS

Architecture, Historiography, Visigoths, Asturian Kingdom, Mozarabic.

## CAPITALIA VERBA

Architectura, Historiographia, Visigothi, Regnum Asturorum, Lingua Mozarabica.

A few years ago, Gisela Ripoll and I wrote an article calling for a methodological revision of Visigothic architectural studies.<sup>2</sup> In particular, we proposed a broadening the scope of material evidenced used in studies of Visigothic architecture. We warned that, current scholarship that failed to apply new material evidence to long-standing research questions was leading too heedlessly to a sweeping revision of an otherwise foundational historical chronological. Continued scholarly emphasis on the history of style above material and historical chronology has a long tradition in Iberian medieval studies and has been motivated, time and again, by struggles between intellectual factions, institutional expectations that limit what may or may not serve as a theoretical framework, attempts to consolidate a discourse based on a priori stylistic or formal biases and, finally, the desire to deny or minimise the influence of one or another of the Peninsula's two medieval socio-religious identities, for example, Christianity and Islam. In all cases, contemporary ideology—political or simply academic—has had an inordinate influence on our handling and interpretation of extant material.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I will first catalogue and critique chronological revisionism that has been applied to early medieval Iberian church architecture since the 1990s, identifying the drawbacks and successes of a discourse. I will focus on recent efforts to radically redate the majority of buildings previously associated with the Visigothic period (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries); a trend so sweeping that it leaves us with little of value from this formative period of Iberian history. The danger of such radical changes is, of course, eschewal of any data that does not fit the central theory. Furthermore, such a broad shift in dates (from the 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> centuries to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>) discounts the fact that these churches were built in order to set the stage for the liturgy of the period, known today as the Old Hispanic liturgy. What this question of liturgy reminds us—perhaps paradoxically—is that heterogeneity was the rule of the day, not the homogeneity. When we account for liturgical furnishings, interior divisions of spaces through such furnishings, interior access routes and processional corridors, few buildings present the same exact expression of liturgical function. It makes little sense then, in my opinion, to expect them to uniformly follow stylistic conventions. Through a survey of architectural material surviving from these different periods, I will demonstrate that stylistic trends cannot, alone, account for the myriad of additional factors—architectural, liturgical, and other (topographical, social, etc.)—that influenced the creation and use of these vastly different buildings.

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2. Ripoll, Gisela; Carrero, Eduardo. "Art wisigoth en Hispania: en quête d'une révision nécessaire". *Perspective. La revue de l'institut national d'histoire de l'art*, 2 (2009): 256-276.

3. Chevalier, Pascale. "Germigny, une architecture originale?". *Bulletin du centre d'études médiévales*, 11 (2019): 33.



## 1. Visigoths and (some) archaeologists

In the last few decades many scholars have undertaken a chronological revision that relocated all Early Medieval churches previously classified as from the Visigothic period (6<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> centuries), into a period closer to the 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The paradigmatic case study is that of the monastic complex of Santa María de Melque (Toledo). Though initially thought of as a 10<sup>th</sup> century church, it was consequently dated to the 7<sup>th</sup> century after archaeological excavations in the 1970s. Following an assessment of Umayyad influence through sculpture on the Visigothic church by Sally Garen, the building was redated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century, allowing for its construction to occur after the integration of Umayyad cultural forces into the arts of the peninsula over the course of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup> There followed, like a chain of dominoes, the redating of numerous other Visigothic churches including Santa Lucía del Trampal, San Pedro de la Nave, Quintanilla de las Viñas, San Juan de Baños, Santa Comba de Bande or San Pedro de la Mata.

Recently, Gisela Ripoll has convincingly demonstrated the inaccuracies of this theory. In the case of the alcazaba of Mérida for instance, a fragment of Visigothic architectural ornament was in fact reused and integrated into an Umayyad building. This form of transference, from Visigothic to Umayyad, presents an altogether different picture from that proposed by those who presume that all such ornamental motifs were inherently influenced by Islamic art.<sup>5</sup>

Key to this new interpretive framework is the role of stone, barrel vaulting, next to the alleged Umayyad dependence on an applied sculpture that served to date an entire building. Scholars holding this revisionist view argue that this architectural form began to be used on the peninsula only after the Muslim invasion of 711, being influenced by the Umayyad architecture of the Middle East. Under this premise, the only surviving Hispanic architecture that dates from before the Muslim invasion consists of basilicas with wooden roofs and masonry walls reinforced with reused ashlar.<sup>6</sup> This assertion presents two main problems. First, extant Iberian Umayyad architecture, including such influential buildings as the mosque of Cordoba and the palace of Madinat al-Zahra, do not have stone vaults. Thus, if Christian churches were truly influenced by Islamic architecture, this influence must have reached the Iberia directly from Islamic sources on the other side of the Mediterranean and

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4. Garen, Sally. "Santa María de Melque and Church Construction under Muslim Rule". *Journal of the Architectural Historians*, 51/3 (1992): 288-306; Garen, Sally. "Transformations and creativity in Visigothic-period Iberia". *Antigüedad y Cristianismo*, 14 (1997): 511-524. The process can be followed in the author's own story in: Caballero, Luis; Moreno, Francisco J. "Balataalmelc. Santa María de Melque. Un monasterio del siglo VIII en territorio toledano", *Lo que vino de Oriente. Horizontes, praxis y dimensión material de los sistemas de dominación fiscal en Al-Andalus*, (ss. VII-IX), Xavier Ballestín, Ernesto Pastor, eds. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports, 2013: 182-204.

5. Ripoll, Gisela. "La sculpture de l'Antiquité tardive et du haut Moyen Âge en péninsule Ibérique, une révision nécessaire". *Les Cahiers de l'École du Louvre*, 17 (2021): <http://journals.openedition.org/cel/19054>.

6. For an elaboration and justification of this proposal, see: Caballero Zoreda, Luis. "A propósito del centenario del 711. Apuntes sobre método de la arqueología de la arquitectura". *Anales de Historia del Arte*, 22/2 (2012): 101-130.



not from the Muslims in Córdoba. Second, this proposal is not based specifically on architectural comparisons. Instead, it first developed from a comparison between organic and geometric decorative motifs carved into historical buildings of present-day Syria with those of Visigothic Spain.<sup>7</sup> From this precarious basis, then, did scholars begin to reinterpret Iberian architectural and archaeological data *en masse*.

This proposal that “Visigothic” architecture actually dates later and is really “Early Medieval”, is not new. For instance, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during a formative period in the historiography of Spanish architecture, authors such as Vicente Lampérez, among others, had serious doubts when it came to cataloguing all these churches which were, otherwise, generally accepted as Visigothic.<sup>8</sup> Then, in 1961, Josep Puig i Cadafalch classified the churches of San Pedro de la Nave, Santa Comba de Bande, Santa María de Quintanilla de las Viñas and San Pedro de la Mata as “premozárabes” – that is to say, as dating to the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> He based this idea on analogies with Asturian buildings, especially in relation to decorative sculpture. Puig’s proposal was not accepted by the scholarly community at the time. But in the late-20th century revisionist scholars echoed Puig’s assertion by citing some tenuous stylistic reasons for the reclassification of Iberian churches, such as their size, the supposed “break” between these buildings and late Roman patterns, or an unclear “new distribution” of architecture based on a simple comparison of plans<sup>10</sup>.

This new interpretation casts Iberian Muslims in the role of transmitters of ancient construction methods, but it simultaneously claims that they did not use these methods in their own works. Following this chronological revision, scholars have created new classifications and typologies of vaults or even types of altars in order to justify the hypothesis. In addition, the results of chemical analysis of the building’s mortar and dendrochronology of wooden elements are considered valid only if the results concur with later dates for the building under study. When scientific dating does give rise to earlier dates for certain elements, these are explained merely as instances of reuse of early building materials.<sup>11</sup> Radiocarbon

7. Utrero, María de los Ángeles. “Late-Antique and Early Medieval Hispanic Churches and the Archeology of Architecture: Revisions and Reinterpretation of Constructions, Chronologies and Contexts”. *Medieval Archeology*, 54 (2010): 1-33.

8. Lampérez y Romea, Vicente. *Historia de la arquitectura cristiana española, según el estudio de los elementos y sus monumentos*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1908 (reedited in 1930).

9. Puig i Cadafalch, Josep. *L’art wisigothique et ses survivances. Recherches sur les origines et le développement de l’art en France et en Espagne du IV<sup>e</sup> au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris: F. de Nobele, 1961: 131-151.

10. Martínez Jiménez, Javier; Sastre de Diego, Isaac; Tejerizo García, Carlos. *The Iberian Peninsula between 300 and 850. An Archaeological Perspective*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018: 218-223. For a summary of the problem, see: Walker, Rose. *Art in Spain and Portugal from the Romans to the Early Middle Ages. Routes and Myths*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016: 131-138.

11. For example, the church of San Pedro de la Nave (Zamora) has traditionally been dated to the 7th century, although through its comparative analysis with other early medieval churches, it has been taken to a period between the 9th and 11th centuries. The analysis of one of its beams gave a chronology of the 5th century. The researchers who proposed the chronological shift of the church justified it by the fact that it must have been reused from a previous building. See: Caballero, Luis; Arce, Fernando. “La iglesia de San Pedro de la Nave (Zamora). Arqueología y arquitectura”. *Archivo Español de Arqueología*,



dating offers a spectrum of possible dates, and revisionist scholars have chosen selectively, for the sole purpose of consolidating the proposal that the stone vaulted buildings should be dated to after the Visigothic period. As a result, empirical data is interpreted in a prejudicial manner, resulting in very broad chronological ranges that are streamlined through the superimposition of outmoded stylistic analysis. Of course, not all Spanish and European academia agrees with this chronological drift.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Arriving to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The Asturian Labyrinth

By way of a brief introduction, let us begin in north-western Iberia in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Asturias was one of the few regions that continued to be ruled by Christians after the conquest of the Peninsula by the Muslims in 711 and the subsequent disappearance of the Visigothic kingdom of Toledo, to which Asturias had previously belonged.<sup>13</sup> The revisionist chronology of Visigothic buildings has

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70 (1997): 221-274; and Rodríguez Trobajo, Eduardo; Alonso Matthias, Fernán; Caballero Zoreda, Luis. "Datación de una viga de la iglesia de San Pedro de la Nave (Zamora)". *Archivo Español De Arqueología*, 71 (1998): 283-294.

12. Arbeiter, Achim. "Alegato por la riqueza del inventario monumental hispanovisigodo", *Visigodos y Omeas. Un debate entre la Antigüedad tardía y la alta Edad Media*, Luis Caballero, Pedro Mateos, eds. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000: 249-263; Arbeiter, Achim. "Die Sakralarchitektur Hispaniens im 'Reich von Toledo' aus der Sicht der aktuellen Forschung". *Antiquité tardive*, 23 (2015): 219-238; Azkárate, Agustín; Ripoll, Gisela; Souto, Juan Antonio. "Algunas reflexiones personales sobre el simposio Visigodos y omeas", *Visigodos y Omeas. Un debate entre la Antigüedad tardía y la alta Edad Media*, Luis Caballero, Pedro Mateos, eds. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2000: 457-459; Ripoll, Gisela; Carrero, Eduardo. "Art wisigoth en Hispania". *Perspective. Revue de l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art*, without number/2 (2009): 256-276; Carrero Santamaría, Eduardo. "Teoría y método en la Historia de la arquitectura medieval. Algunas reflexiones", *Seminari d'estudis històrics 2007: Arqueologia de l'arquitectura*, Guillem Rosselló Bordoy, ed. Palma de Mallorca: Societat Arqueològica Lul·liana, 2008: 5-27; Rico Camps, Daniel. "Arquitectura y epigrafía en la Antigüedad Tardía. Testimonios hispanos". *Pyrenae*, 40/1 (2009): 7-53; Chavarría Arnau, Alexandra. "Churches and Aristocracies in Seventh-Century Spain: Some Thoughts on the Debate on Visigothic Churches". *Early Medieval Europe*, 18/2 (2010): 160-74; Ripoll, Gisela; Carrero, Eduardo; Rico, Daniel; Tuset, Francesc; Velázquez, Isabel; López Batlle, Aarón; Mas, Catalina; Valls, Montserrat; Cau, Miguel Ángel. "La arquitectura religiosa hispánica del siglo IV al X y el proyecto del *Corpus Architecturae Religiosae Europaeae*—CARE-Hispania". *Hortus Artium Medievalium*, 18/1 (2012): 45-73; Rico Camps, Daniel. "Inscripciones monumentales del siglo VIII (de Cangas a Pravia)". *Territorio, Sociedad y Poder*, 9 (2014): 68-98; Sanjurjo-Sánchez, Jorge; Blanco-Rotea, Rebeca; Sánchez-Pardo, José Carlos. "An Interdisciplinary Study of Early Mediaeval Churches in North-Western Spain (Galicia)". *Heritage*, 2 (2019): 599-610; and Ripoll, Gisela. "La sculpture de l'Antiquité tardive...". For a critique of the subject, full of interesting proposals and not without a sense of humour: Uscatescu, Alexandra; Ruiz Souza, Juan Carlos. "Orientalismos y entanglement cultural: estímulos y desenfoques historiográficos". *Anales de Historia del Arte*, 22 (2012): 297-308; and Uscatescu, Alexandra; Ruiz Souza, Juan Carlos. "El occidentalismo de Hispania y la koiné artística mediterránea (siglos VII-VIII)". *Goya*, 347 (2014): 95-115. Ideas also collected in: Uscatescu, Alexandra. *Alfonso II y el ideal constantiniano. De crónicas y de cultura visual*. Madrid: La Ergástula, 2021.

13. An overview to the Visigothic Kingdom, in: Arce, Javier. *Esperando a los árabes. Los visigodos en Hispania (507-711)*. Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2017.



significant implications for our understanding of Asturian stone vaulted buildings. As the Asturian kingdom was founded c. 718 only a few years after the arrival of the Muslims, it has been traditionally considered the stylistic heirs of Visigothic architecture. If “Visigothic” architecture is reinterpreted as dating from the 9th or 10th centuries, then the stylistic and cultural origin of the Asturian buildings must also be reconsidered.

The architecture that developed in the kingdom of Asturias between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries has long been subject to various formal interpretations. In the 1960s, scholars described the art connected to the Asturian monarchy as a material expression of the Carolingian periphery and, as such, as a kind of local derivation of models that had been imposed from Aachen. This misinterpretation of the historical facts quickly transformed into an axiom for art history. As a result, some historians considered King Alfonso II of Asturias—who can be directly connected to 9<sup>th</sup> century Asturian architecture through material and documentary evidence—a feudal dependent of Charlemagne. They based this assertion on the propagandistic exaggeration of Einhard in his hagiographic *Vita Karoli*, in addition to some other minor sources.<sup>14</sup> This premise, when transferred to the architecture of the period, affords an interpretation of the art created during Alfonso II's reign as nothing more than the local epitome of a fundamentally Carolingian style.<sup>15</sup> In an outstanding review of the problem, Isidro G. Bango made it clear that the supposed Asturian material dependence on a Carolingian context was a construct of European—including Spanish—historiography. Bango notes the real absence of a stylistic relationship between the architectural culture of the Carolingian Empire and that of the Kingdom of Asturias, and even less evidence of Asturian cultural and stylistic subordination to the Carolingian centre.<sup>16</sup> And if there was no stylistic relationship between the architecture of Aachen and that of Oviedo, there could be no functional relationship either. For example, scholars in the 1970s and 1980s had

14. Barbero, Abilio; Vigil, Marcelo. *La formación del feudalismo en la Península Ibérica*. Barcelona: Crítica, 1978: 245, 318-319; Riché, Pierre. *Les Carolingiens. Une famille qui fit l'Europe*. Paris: Pluriel, 1993: 121; Collins, Roger. *Caliphs and Kings. Spain, 796-1031*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2012: 69; González García, Antonio. “La proyección europea del reino de Asturias: política, cultura y economía (718- 910)”. *El Futuro del Pasado*, 5 (2014): 238-239.

15. Dodds, Jerrilyn. “Las pinturas de San Julián de los Prados. Arte, diplomacia y herejía”. *Goya*, 191 (1986): 260-261; Azcárate Ristori, José María. “Aspectos de la influencia germánica en el prerrománico asturiano”, *I Jornadas sobre Arte Prerrománico y Románico en Asturias*. Villaviciosa: Ayuntamiento de Villaviciosa, 1988: 15-31; Nieto Alcaide, Víctor. *Arte Prerrománico Asturiano*. Salinas: Ayalga, 1989: 70-100; González, Alberto. *La proyección europea del reino de Asturias: política, cultura y economía (718-910)*. Salamanca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Salamanca, 2014: 240-242. For a summary of the problem, around San Julián de los Prados: Morais Morán, José Alberto. “El valor clásico de la arquitectura asturiana (s. IX): la iglesia de San Julián de los Prados. Entre la tradición ‘antiquizante’ hispanovisigoda y la carolingia”. *Anales de Historia del Arte*, extra number (2009): 233-246.

16. Bango Torviso, Isidro G. “El arte asturiano y el Imperio carolingio”, *Arte prerrománico y románico en Asturias*. Villaviciosa: Ayuntamiento de Villaviciosa, 1988: 31-88; Bango Torviso, Isidro G. “De la arquitectura visigoda a la arquitectura asturiana: los edificios ovetenses en la tradición de Toledo frente a Aquisgrán”, *L'Europe héritière de l'Espagne wisigothique*, Jacques Fontaine, Christine Pellistrandi, eds. Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 1992: 303-313.





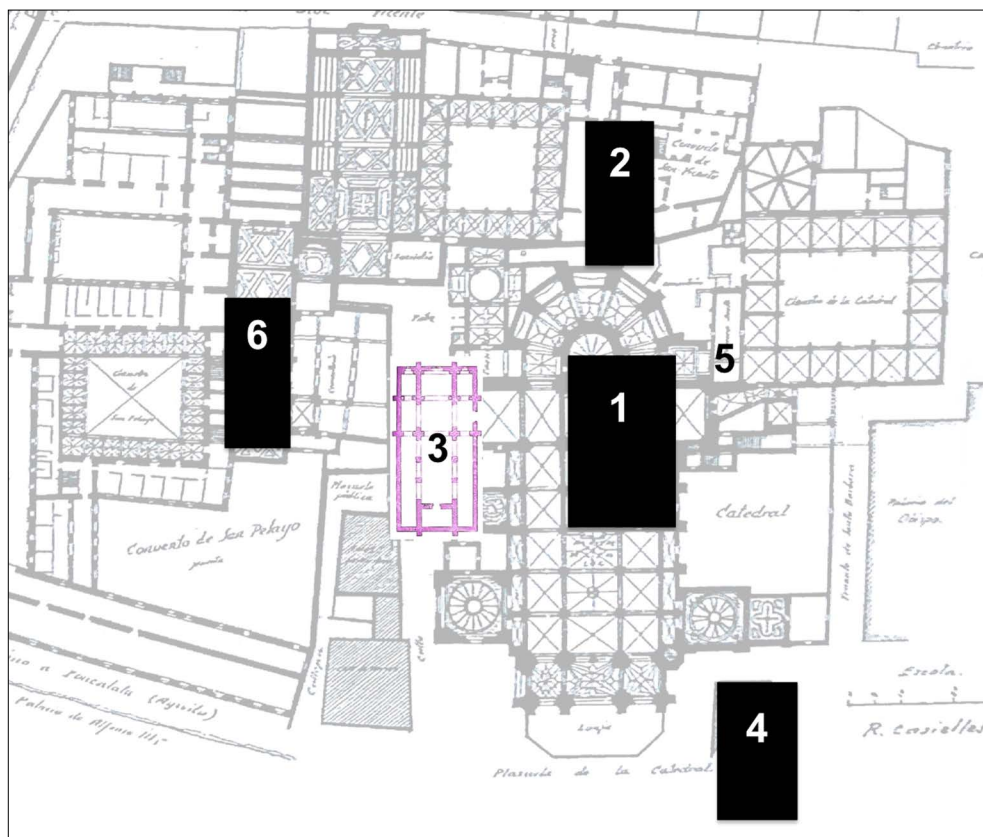


ILLUSTRATION. 1. OVIEDO CATHEDRAL COMPLEX. 1. CHURCH OF THE SAVIOUR. 2. SAN VINCENTE ABBEY CHURCH. 3. FUNERARY CHURCH OF SANTA MARÍA. 4. PARISH CHURCH OF SAN TIRSO. 5. TREASURY. 6. SAN PELAYO ABBEY CHURCH. ILLUSTRATION PROVIDED BY EDUARDO CARRERO.

interpreted the “Cámara Santa” of the cathedral of Oviedo as an imitation of the palatine chapel of Aachen, but they are very different buildings visually, spatially, and functionally. In fact, the “Cámara Santa” was not a palatine chapel as sixteenth-century historians thought it to be. Instead, it was the monumental treasury of the church of San Salvador.<sup>17</sup>

If we can rule out foreign influence, what then were the origins of such impressive Asturian architecture? Who produced such exquisite buildings as the palace of el Naranco or the complexes of churches at Oviedo (see illustration 1)

17. Carrero Santamaría, Eduardo. *El conjunto catedralicio de Oviedo. Arquitectura, topografía y funciones en la ciudad episcopal*. Oviedo: Real Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, 2003. The analogies with the Carolingian regarding palatial architecture were highlighted by Puig i Cadafalch for the Naranco nave, but only from a functional and non-formal perspective: Puig i Cadafalch, Josep. *L'art wisigothique et ses survivances*. Paris: Générique, 1961: 109-110.



and Compostela? In Asturias, archaeological lacunas historically challenged the drawing of links between buildings of the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries and the period immediately prior. Through a combination of Abilio Barbero's and Marcelo Vigil's proposals and Cantabrian "indigenism", it had become a badge of honour to claim that Asturias was never Romanized but, between the 1980s and the 1990s, art historians and archaeologists framed the ancient history of Asturias in a new historiographic paradigm. The rediscovery of the Cimadevilla Roman baths (1990-1995), the study of Gijón's Roman city wall (1990-1991), and the material richness of the Villa de Veranes (excavations 1983-2007 revealed a large Roman villa with a medieval church, surrounded by a large necropolis) and other deposits, provided substantial material evidence that Asturias indeed underwent Romanization. Carmen Fernández Ochoa coined the expression "Asterix syndrome," to describe the erroneous position maintained by many who, in spite of the archaeological evidence, considered Asturias resistant to and untamed by Roman influence, like the Gallican village from the "Asterix" comic by Albert Uderzo and René Goscinny.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, some scholars began to invoke Rome as a reference point for all the Asturian evidence. For example, Bango argued that the conceptual framework of 9<sup>th</sup> century Asturian architecture was carried by displaced, southern Visigoths who had moved to Asturias, but the monumental landscape that they created was based on a local tradition with deep classical roots.<sup>19</sup> The paintings of Santullano or San Julian de los Prados (Oviedo), representing classical architecture (see illustration 2), provided much evidence to justify this link between late-Roman Iberia and Asturias, and were directly linked to the paintings found at Gijón Roman baths (see illustration 3). In 2007 at the villa de Veranes, excavators uncovered a unique Roman brick. On one side was a graffito with the words *UTERE FELIX/(D)OMVM TV/AM*, and on the reverse, a charcoal sketch representing curtains that hang collected at three points. Rapidly the archaeologists who studied it related this to the cloths in the Santullano paintings and proposed hypothetical "Late Roman" paintings that might have been in the church of Santa María y San Pedro de Riera (constructed near the villa de Veranes) as an intermediary link.<sup>20</sup>

According to this hypothesis, the classical substrate underlying Asturian architecture was as important an influence on its buildings as the styles and customs of the displaced Visigoths who moved north in response to the arrival of the Muslims. But linking the Roman tradition to 9<sup>th</sup> century Asturian buildings was not so easy. The archaeological record between the Roman presence (1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries) and the foundation of the Kingdom of Asturias is relatively vacant,

18. Fernández Ochoa, Carmen. "El síndrome de Astérix y las termas de Campo Valdés". *El comercio*, 28 January 1992: 40. In the last two decades, the discovery of Roman settlements in Asturias has multiplied.

19. Bango Torviso, Isidro G. "La cultura artística de la monarquía astur, la última manifestación de la antigüedad", *Astures. Pueblos y culturas en la frontera del Imperio romano*. Gijón: Gran Enciclopedia Asturiana, 1998: 171-187.

20. Fernández Ochoa, Carmen; Gil Sendino, Fernando; Del Hoyo, Javier. "Una inscripción y un dibujo sobre ladrillo hallados en la villa romana de Veranes (Gijón, Asturias)". *Archivo Español de Arqueología*, 80 (2007): 183-190, especially 188.







ILLUSTRATION. 2. SAN JULIÁN DE LOS PRADOS (OVIEDO). SECTION DEPICTING THE IDEAL RESTITUTION OF ITS WALL PAINTINGS. (9<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY), AFTER MAGÍN BERENGUER. ILLUSTRATION PROVIDED BY EDUARDO CARRERO.

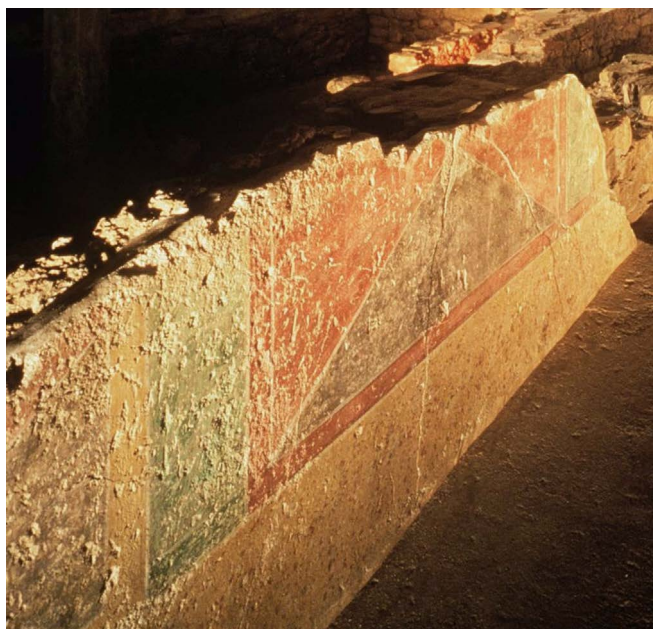


ILLUSTRATION. 3. CIMADEVILLA ROMAN BATHS (GIJÓN). ROMAN WALL PAINTINGS. ILLUSTRATION PROVIDED BY EDUARDO CARRERO.

apart from occasional reused buildings, dispersed stones with epigraphy, or fragments of portable art and liturgical furnishings.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Roman remains in Asturias, including Gijón and Veranes were constructed many centuries before and the apogee of Asturian Christian architecture of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. This apogee was, in particular, closely related to the development, at this time, of Oviedo's ceremonial court and to the robust architectural patronage of Alfonso II (reigned 791-842). City, church, and palace were created in the image of Toledo herself, according to Alfonso III's chroniclers (late 9<sup>th</sup> century) who described their home as a continuation of the Toledan Visigothic kingdom (*sicuti Toletum fuerat*)<sup>22</sup>. It is therefore logical to suppose that Asturian architecture similarly represents the continuation of the Visigothic style, an idea originally developed by Josep Puig i Cadafalch.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the sporadic archaeological remains provide the perfect substrate from which to base the hypothesis that, after the arrival of the Muslims, Asturias became the recipient of what was left behind from the, previous, Visigothic kingdom, whose capital was Toledo. And yet, the intellectual heirs of 19<sup>th</sup>-century regionalism did not seem to understand that the territory of the Kingdom of Asturias had once been part of the Visigothic realm. In this way, strange twists and turns were drawn that obviated or softened the Visigothic presence, either by evoking far-flung byzantine and oriental influences or interpreting the Asturian Pre-Romanesque style as the last expression of the classical world, skipping over important, local intermediaries. Amongst such intermediaries, Jacques Fontaine proposed, for instance, that 9<sup>th</sup>-century Asturian architecture should be interpreted in relationship with the churches of Santa Eulalia de Bóveda, San Fructuoso de Montelios or Marialba<sup>24</sup>. If one follows the revisionist chronology that I cited in the previous section, these architectural antecedents to the Asturian buildings should now be dated to the same period or after the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when Asturian monarchical architecture was blossoming. Under this reading, Asturias' vaulted architecture would not have any relation to the Visigothic kingdom they saw themselves as inheritors of insight of the Muslim invasion. Instead, the Asturians searched for architectural inspiration from the Umayyads in Syria (to avoid the other problem of interpreting Asturian architecture as the product of a "colonisation"

21. García Álvarez-Busto, Alejandro; Muñiz López, Iván. *Arqueología medieval en Asturias*. Gijón: Trea, 2010: 275-283.

22. Gil Fernández, Juan; Moralejo, José L.; Ruiz de la Peña, Juan I., eds. *Crónicas asturianas*. Oviedo: Universidad de Oviedo, 1985: 174.

23. Puig i Cadafalch, Josep. *L'art wisigothique...*: 88-130.

24. Fontaine, Jacques. *L'art préroman hispanique*. Yonne: La Pierre-que-Vire, 1973: 264.



from Iberia's own 9<sup>th</sup>-century Islamic Umayyad rulers<sup>25</sup>), despite clear and well-argued evidence to the contrary put forth by García de Castro<sup>26</sup>.

### 3. The jump to the 10<sup>th</sup> century

As we have seen, the architectural move from what had been considered Visigothic to Asturian has been historiographically complex. Similarly, studies of the old kingdom of Asturias' expansion southwards have faced uncertainty about the architectural styles and techniques that were transmitted. Once again, the chronological gaps force us to be cautious. With their advance towards the plateau, León became the capital of the kingdom of Asturias in AD910. Did this first stage of Christian (re)settlement south the Cantabrian massif affect the architecture? Without entering the old debate about depopulation, repopulation, or continuing population of the plateau zone<sup>27</sup>, what monumental landscape did the settlers encounter? What was the religious architecture they found, and what and how did they build after their consolidation on the *Meseta*?

There is no doubt that old Visigothic cities with Roman origins still stood in place. At least some buildings were erected directly on these Roman foundations. For example, León's 10<sup>th</sup>-century cathedral reused the buildings of the old Roman baths, which had temporarily housed the royal palace shortly before the cathedral was built. In his still controversial book, Gómez-Moreno presents a generalising perspective on the problem, describing with the label "mozarabic" the architecture built between the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century and the early-11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>28</sup>. Gómez-Moreno justifies this label on the basis that the aesthetic principles of all this art had Muslim roots, imported by Christians who had lived under Islamic rule between 711 and the 9<sup>th</sup> century and who thus had arabized tastes. These Christians, consequently described in the scholarship as *mozárabes*, had fled to the north of the Peninsula seeking a society in accordance with their religious principles<sup>29</sup>. Subsequent scholars have focused on taxonomic analysis of the architectural forms: horseshoe arches,

25. Utrero, María de los Ángeles. "Asturias después de Asturias. Unas conclusiones introductorias", *Iglesias altomedievales en Asturias. Arqueología y arquitectura*, María de los Ángeles Utrero, ed. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2016: 221-228.

26. García de Castro, César. "Asturias ante la controversia historiográfica sobre el impacto omeya en la arquitectura y arqueología de la Alta Edad Media hispánica", *Arabes in patria Asturiensium*, Clara Elena Pietro Entrialgo, ed. Oviedo: Asturiensis Regni Territorium, 2011: 103-120.

27. Escudero Manzano, Gonzalo J. "La 'despoblación' y 'rehabilitación' del valle del Duero: La problemática de las fuentes y el debate historiográfico". *Estudios Medievales Hispánicos*, 5 (2016): 151-172.

28. This was preceded by Gómez-Moreno, Manuel. "Excursión a través del arco de herradura". *Cultura Española*, 3 (1906): 785-811.

29. Gómez-Moreno, Manuel. *Iglesias mozárabes. Arte español de los siglos IX a XI*. Madrid: Centro de Estudios Históricos, 1919 (re-edited in Granada: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Granada, 1998). "Mozarabics" are differentiated in modern scholarship from muladíes, Christians who had adopted Muslim customs while living under Muslim rule, and *dimníes*, Christians who converted to Islam.



modillions, gallon vaults, merlons, Caliphal-inspired capitals, mouldings framing the upper part of windows and doors, etc. The architectural changes from Asturian style that Gómez-Moreno identified in buildings that are dated to the 9<sup>th</sup> century and later, such as San Juan de la Peña or San Salvador de Valdediós, have thus been attributed to those who left Islamic territory to seek refuge in Christian lands.

Although Gómez-Moreno's hypothesis and method was accepted by the academy and widely assimilated by scholars at the time, not all the scientific community agreed. A few years later, José Camón Aznar questioned Gómez-Moreno's general theory, proposing the alternative terminology of "repopulation art" to replace the ethnically determinist "Mozarabic". He insisted that the supposed renewal of the arts—and especially architecture—had not been spurred by Christians fleeing the recently-concluded Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba. Instead, he argued, the new architectural style was influenced by buildings abandoned in the vast no man's land of the Iberian plateaus after the 8<sup>th</sup>-century withdrawal of the Christians to Galicia, Asturias, and the Pyrenees<sup>30</sup>. In those Visigothic cities and ruined buildings, Camón Aznar argued, the repopulators had encountered a repertoire of construction elements that were, in fact, Visigothic and not arabized, such as the horseshoe arch. This initial proposal was further developed by Isidro G. Bango, who also underlined the role of hispano-visigothic architecture in the reconquered territories being used as a source for subsequent renovations. Like Aznar, Bango argued that, in their southward expansion from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the new settlers found the northern plateau territory abandoned by its inhabitants and assimilated the architecture that they found<sup>31</sup>. He therefore critiqued the term "Mozarabic" and its implications of Islamic cultural influence, also preferring euphemisms such as "repopulation architecture", "frontier architecture" or, simply, "10<sup>th</sup>-century art".

30. Camón Aznar, José. "Arquitectura española del siglo X". *Goya*, 52 (1963): 206-219.

31. Bango Torviso, Isidro G. "Arquitectura de la décima centuria, ¿re población o mozárabe?". *Goya*, 122 (1974): 68-75; Bango Torviso, Isidro G. "El neovisigotismo artístico de los siglos IX y X: la restauración de ciudades y templos". *Revista de ideas estéticas*, 148 (1979): 319-338; Bango Torviso, Isidro G. *El mozárabe*. Madrid: Historia16, 1992; Bango Torviso, Isidro G. *Arte prerrománico hispano. El arte en la España cristiana de los siglos VI al XI*. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2001: 325-331; Bango Torviso, Isidro G. "Un gravísimo error en la historiografía española, el empleo equivocado del término mozárabe", *El legado de al-Ándalus. El arte andalusí en los reinos de León y Castilla durante la Edad Media*, Manuel Valdés, ed. Valladolid: Fundación del patrimonio histórico de Castilla y León, 2007: 75-88; Bango Torviso, Isidro G. "Los expolios del paisaje monumental y la arquitectura hispana de los siglos VII al XI. Reflexiones sobre el proceso constructivo de San Miguel de Escalada". *De Arte*, 7 (2008): 7-50, especially 7-19. Without the slightest intention of entering into a debate that I believe is exciting and that should be taken up from new perspectives, an important defender of Mozarabism as an artistic phenomenon in the figurative arts and, above all, in illuminated manuscripts, has been: Mentré, Mireille. *El estilo mozárabe. La pintura cristiana hispánica en torno al año mil*. Madrid: Encuentro, 1994, as a recapitulation of her position, published in previous works. For his part, Joaquín Yarza expressed his position contrary to said terminology, which, as in architecture, would be conditioned not by the codices of Islamic origin, but by a missing group of people, a miniature group of hispano-visigoths and asturians: Yarza Luaces, Joaquín. *Arte asturiano, arte mozárabe*. Salamanca: Cuadernos de Historia del Arte, 1986; Yarza Luaces, Joaquín. "¿Existió una miniatura mozárabe?", *Actas del I congreso nacional de cultura mozárabe (Historia, arte, literatura, liturgia y música)*. Córdoba: CajaSur, Obra Social y Cultural, 1996: 53-71. A conciliator perspective in: Dodds, Jerrilyn. *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spai*. Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1990.



Since the work of Gómez-Moreno, Camón Aznar and Bango Torviso, there has been a tendency to both critique the term “Mozarabic” as a misleading ethno-religious misnomer and to embrace its ambiguity, as it can be applied both to creations by arabized Christians who emigrated to Christian territories and to Andalusian Christian working and living in Muslim territories. As Josemi Lorenzo has explained, marketing has made “Mozarabic” a useful brand that can also be applied to historical tourist routes and attractions, including the road to Santiago itself. In wider academic circles, although the term “Mozarabic” continues to be used, scholars seem to have arrived at a *entente cordiale* in which, for convenience, the adjective is applied although there is acknowledgement that it is problematic, and that there are different hypotheses surrounding its use. In other words, “Mozarabic” seems more effective from a conceptual point of view than the various alternative assortment of terms with which many have tried to replace it<sup>32</sup>.

The relative acceptance of the term “Mozarabic” and reluctance to revise conceptual approaches has been due, then, to the general immobility of the mass-media and of non-specialist public opinion, where the traditional terminology has profound weight or utility.<sup>33</sup> As a result, Gómez-Moreno’s theories have gained credibility, especially among a more conservative sub-group of scholars. Despite being a deterministic concept questioned by many scholars, the term “Mozarabic” has been resurrected by some archaeologists to establish deep-seeded roots to the revisionist chronology of churches that had previously been considered Visigothic. Because they wanted to move the dating of vaulted buildings from the Visigothic period to a later date —as we saw in the first sections— these scholars have been obliged to review the entire architectural chronology prior to the arrival of the Romanesque period in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century. They placed these Christian vaulted buildings, then, in the period of the late 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, including Santa María de Melque, Bande, Nave, or Santa Lucía del Trampal, even though they lack the stylistic characteristics (ornamental elements as well as such architectural features as modillions, gallon vaults or merlons) most associated with the Mozarabic period. This process redefines artistic or architectural style from a concept that encompasses certain groups of aesthetic factors to one categorically synonymous with a specific, homogeneous social and cultural identity<sup>34</sup>. In this approach, then, buildings from the Mozarabic period no longer necessarily share formal features but can include anything from barrel-vaulted single nave churches to three-naved timber roofed basilicas. In more recent publications, to accommodate so much variety, some scholars have with good intention begun

32. Lorenzo Arribas, Josemi. “Iglesias mozárabes (1919). Cien años de un libro”, *Rinconete*. <[https://cvc.cervantes.es/el\\_rinconete/anteriores/septiembre\\_19/11092019\\_01.htm#np3](https://cvc.cervantes.es/el_rinconete/anteriores/septiembre_19/11092019_01.htm#np3)>.

33. Martínez Tejera, Artemio M. “La arquitectura cristiana del siglo X en el Reino de León (910-1037): de ‘mozárabe’ a ‘arquitectura de fusión’”. *Antigüedad y cristianismo. Monografías históricas sobre la Antigüedad tardía*, 28 (2011): 163-229; Martínez Tejera, Artemio M. “La ‘orientalización ornamental’ de la mal llamada ‘arquitectura mozárabe’ en el reino astur-leonés (siglos VIII-X): ¿inercial o inducida?”. *Anales de Historia del Arte*, 22 (2012): 221-235.

34. Style, according to the dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language: “a set of characteristics that identify the artistic tendency of a time, genre or author”: Real Academia Española. “Estilo”, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*. <<https://dle.rae.es/estilo>>.





to use the simple qualifier of “Early Medieval”. While this term helpfully addresses the cultural diversity of pre-Romanesque Iberia, its employment to architecture only dating to the 9<sup>th</sup> century onwards discounts many centuries of important cultural activity and architectural development.

It is important to note that, despite the best efforts of academics, the term Mozarabic lives on in current Spanish society and is, indeed, growing in prominence. Contrary to academic interpretations of Mozarabism as a dramatic shift from the Visigothic past which celebrated Islamic styles in Christian settings, current political players see Spain’s Mozarabic period as a model of cultural survival in face of external threats. It is imperative, in this case then, that historians shed light on all of Iberia’s periods and cultures in order to help the general population navigate these complicated issues.

#### **4. Stylistic distance from near neighbours and stylistic proximity to distant churches**

The historiography that I have described above is one of constant push and pull by opposing sides; when one group claims Muslim influence as a determining factor of the national style, whether it was the Early Medieval Mozarabic, the other side has denied this influence for other reasons, such as desiring to underline the Christian origins of Spain even though today’s Spain did not yet exist. From the Roman to the Visigothic, from the Visigothic to the Asturian and then the Asturian to the Mozarabic, labels and more labels have been applied. Yet, comparison of the buildings in light of these labels reveals as many points of similarity as differences. Stylistic analogies in architectural ornament or in the design of vaults can be reinterpreted in many ways and, in the case of recent proposals of (non-Iberian) Umayyad influence, stylistic parallels have been drawn in many, at times convoluted, directions. Despite tenuous interpretations of stylistic links, the theory has quickly gained authority and been used, then, to justify sweeping revisions to some otherwise well-reasoned chronologies.

The survival of so few buildings from this period and the loss of so many monuments that would have, because of their locations in key cities, been of utmost importance, raise significant challenges to this theory. There are simply too many insurmountable material voids that make definitive links between one Iberian phenomenon and another from across the medieval world untenable, both from a chronological and geographical perspective. What is required, then, is a more careful survey of what exactly does survive in Iberia from this period and what, based primarily on this material alone, can we say about architectural trends before the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Thankfully, despite great losses, several key sites have been carefully dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Of particular interest and importance is Terrassa (in the old see of Egara), the only architectural cathedral complex preserved to before the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The site is rich in material evidence of this period as it is made up of at least three churches dated during extensive excavation campaign that





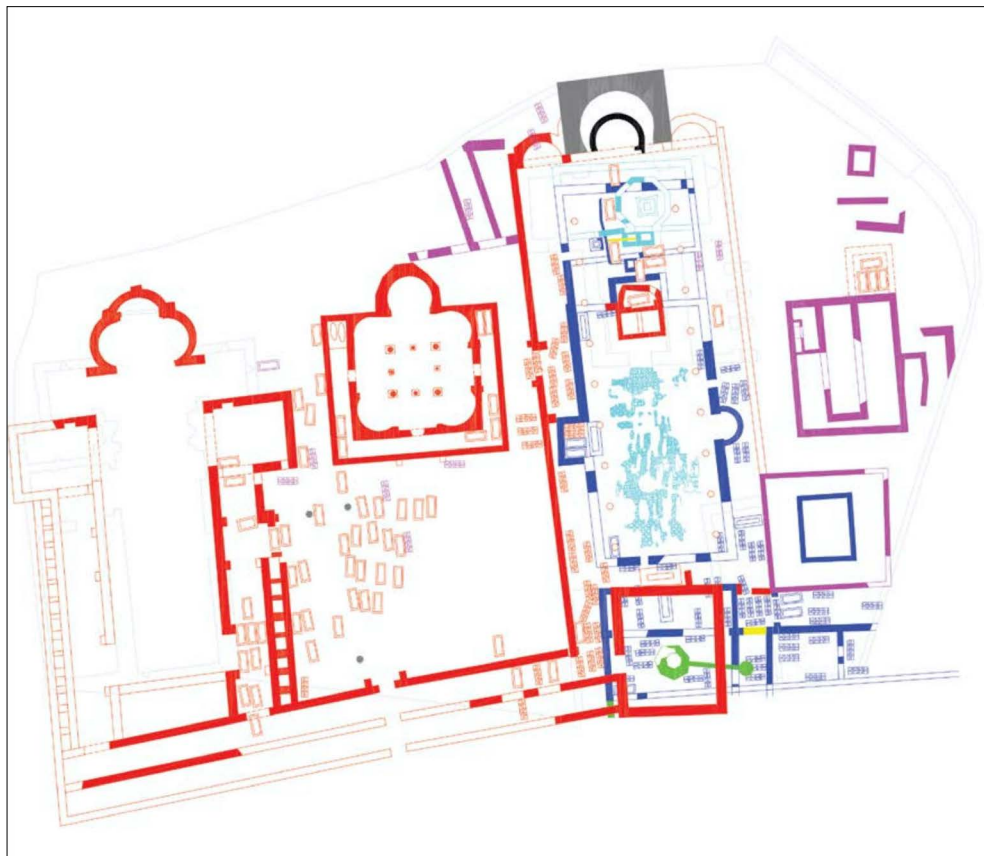


ILLUSTRATION. 4. TERRASSA CATHEDRAL COMPLEX (VISIGOTHIC SEE OF EGARA) © MUSEU DE TERRASSA-GEMMA GARCIA LLINARES.

employed numerous forms material analysis at and which was completed at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (see illustration 4). The centralized church of Sant Miquel, dated to the 6th century, is the best-preserved building of the ensemble and one of the finest examples of peninsular architecture of the period (see illustration 5)<sup>35</sup>. Yet

35. The report based on this excavation is exemplary for its use of numerous methods and forms of analysis. Garcia i Llinares, Gemma; Moro García, Antonio; Tuset Bertrán, Francesc. *La seu episcopal d'Ègara. Arqueologia d'un conjunt cristià del segle IV al IX*. Tarragona: Institut Català d'Arqueologia Clàssica, 2009. A wider architectural context of the complex in: Carrero Santamaría, Eduardo. "La arquitectura medieval al servicio de las necesidades litúrgicas. Los conjuntos de iglesias". *Anales de Historia del Arte*, Volumen extraordinario (2009): 61-98; and Godoy Fernández, Cristina. "La sede de Egara en el contexto de arquitectura cristiana hispánica durante la Antigüedad Tardía", *Les basíliques de la seu episcopal d'Ègara. Centre i perifèria. VI Jornades de les basíliques històriques de Barcelona*. Barcelona: Ateneu Universitari Sant Pacià, 2022: 171-197. About the church of Sant Miquel: Garcia i Llinares, Gemma; Moro García, Antonio; Tuset Bertrán, Francesc. "L'edifici funerari de Sant Miquel". *Terme. Revista d'Història*, 30 (2015): 75-100.



Terrassa is systematically overlooked as an architectural exemplar of the period in scholarly works on the subject even though it clearly retains barrel vaults and groin vaults for which dates of the sixth century have been convincingly established.<sup>36</sup>

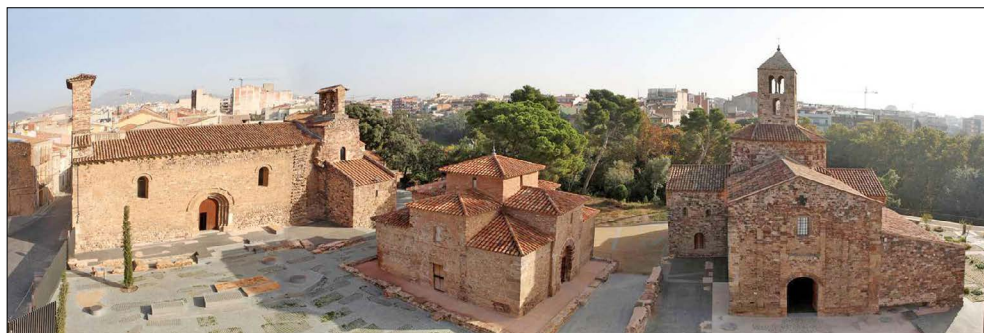


ILLUSTRATION. 5. TERRASSA CATHEDRAL COMPLEX (VISIGOTHIC SEE OF EGARA) © AEROFOTOLINE-MUSEU DE TERRASSA.

In Asturias there are also preserved key, early examples of architecture that have also been securely dated. In this case, documented patronage by the Asturian the monarchy, as well as chronicle and epigraphic sources indicate that these buildings were constructed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. These buildings include such important monuments as San Julián de los Prados, the complex at the mount Naranco and San Salvador de Valdediós. Any surveys of pre-Romanesque Iberian architecture must place these sites at the centre of their stylistic and formal analysis because they are so securely dated. Instead, investigations of Visigothic architecture have too often relied on seventh century churches that were originally located around the periphery of the Visigothic kingdom based out of Toledo.<sup>37</sup> It makes no sense today to define the basilica as a type simply based on isolated churches such as Baños or Quintanilla or to speak of the prominent importance of central-plans of churches that have been absolutely emptied of their interior furnishings, such as Montelios or Melque.<sup>38</sup> In addition, on-going work and recent discoveries across further south, such as Tolmo de Minateda, Los Hitos and the Cathedral of Valencia will undoubtedly introduce key material evidence that must be integrated, without bias, into our categories and historical

36. Striking, for instance, is the fact that the site has as-yet not been granted UNESCO heritage status (the results of a recent application are still pending).

37. In greater detail in: Ripoll, Gisela; Carrero, Eduardo. "Art wisigoth en Hispania..."

38. Carrero Santamaría, Eduardo; Rico Camps, Daniel. "La arquitectura altomedieval desde la liturgia hispánica". *Antiquité Tardive. Revue internationale d'histoire et d'archéologie*, 23 (2015): 239-248.

narratives.<sup>39</sup> Finally, to truly define categories and styles and to accurately trace routes of transmission, we would have to know what the great urban works of Toledo, Mérida, Tarragona, or Seville were like. But, alas, we have nothing from Toledo, nothing from Zaragoza, nothing from Seville and only vestiges that are difficult to interpret from Barcelona. The lack of surviving urban cathedrals of inherent significance should not, however, justify the interpretation of peripheral architectural as archetypal of peninsula-wide stylistic trends. Indeed—and in conclusion—I propose that attempts at imposing overarching categories should be abandoned for a greater appreciation of the diversity, complexity, and richness of Iberia's architectural past. In other words, instead of seeing these realities as problems that must be radically repaired, we should embrace them as expressions of an exceptionally dynamic history. In addition to allowing for the diversity of local styles and building techniques, a greater sensitivity to the differences between centre and periphery and to the role of liturgical furnishing in defining church interiors should manifest sufficient material of interest to occupy us for many years to come.

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39. We are given an idea of the volume of archaeological developments up to 2015 in: Arbeiter, Achim. "Die Sakralarchitektur Hispaniens im 'Reich von Toledo' aus der Sicht der aktuellen forschung". *Antiquité Tardive*, 23 (2015): 219-238.

